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'It's not like this with other people': Deconstructing the Normative Romance Novel through Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis works to explore Sally Rooney's novel *Normal People* within the contextual environment of the genre of the novel as well as the focal point of the marriage plot and the detailed relationship between the novel and the arc of an individual's life. Rooney's work is inherently tied to the history of the women's writing tradition and how the romance novel is the model for a woman's life path. My interest in her work and more specifically this novel was piqued by how she takes into consideration what it means to exist as a female writer in a genre that plays such a role in solidifying gender roles. Romance novels are not necessarily looked to in order to see how a woman must act but because of how successful the genre is the woman within the romance novel has become the pinnacle of womanhood. Thus, the relation between what a novel is as a normative genre (how it attempts to guide one's life) and the increasing need for normality is created. Because the female body is gendered body with maternal characteristics inherent with to their being, the failure to achieve a certain normative behavior is pathological. By reading a novel that includes romance but is not necessarily about romance as a simple romance novel is an injustice to the text's intricacies. There is a specific way in which a novel *about* romance can and should be read.

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Chapter 1: The Romance Novel

Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel* offers an important history of genre work and is heralded by many scholars as a key work for examining the origins of the novel and building the field of literary criticism. Watt prefaces Chapter *V: Love and the Novel: 'Pamela'* by emphasizing the importance of the novel *Pamela* because at the time Samuel Richardson published this work there was not much work being done beyond the episodic plot. To avoid the seemingly copy-paste style of works at the time, Richardson based his novel "on a single action, a courtship" (Watt, 135). Richardson's move to depict this more "Puritan conception of marriage and sexual relations" was important as it reflected, through a novel focusing on a singular love story, the move towards society viewing marriage as crucial for women and hard to achieve (Watt, 137).

Watt then goes on to discuss how critical it is that the rise of the novel be connected with the "much greater freedom of women in modern society"--especially with regard to the relative freedom of choice(i.e., women and men marrying for societal advantage over love) attributed to the individuals in a marriage (Watt, 138). This freedom however was heavily influenced by the economic necessity for women in the eighteenth century to marry and was continually affected by society's strict adherence to paternalistic families. Another key feature of the romance novel that Samuel Richardson created through *Pamela* was the fact that the marriage of the female heroine is economically and socially beneficial to *her* but not the bridegroom. There is a very clear distinction as to whom the majority of the positive social reputation and economic standing is given to post-marriage, and more often than not it is the bride which receives this boost.

Additionally, much of the Puritan ideology that focuses on the dichotomy of purity and eroticism were reflected in and shaped by early romance novels. Watt explores the importance

of both parties partaking in the ceremony being virgins and not having any sort of soiled sexual reputation. This reform of sexual morality is tied to the increasing importance of private property. Husbands must be sure that the sons their wife births are without a doubt his blood and can therefore inherit the land and money. Furthermore, morality is focused on how the fictional heroine "regards her chastity" (Watt, 165). The heroine must protect her decency and must also be sure to express to society how important it is to her.

Moreover, Richardson takes this all a step farther by giving these characteristics to a woman of low birth. In doing so, Richardson suggests that a function of the novel is to "serve a fictional initiation rite into the most fundamental mystery of its society" (Watt, 172). The naming of such a normative part of life, in a way, revolutionized the romance novel as an entire structured piece on one duo. *Pamela* gave to literature a series of complex juxtapositions related to personal relationships: "the ideal and the real, the apparent and the actual, the spiritual and the physical, the conscious, and the unconscious" (Watt, 172). Overall, the takeaway of this chapter in Watt's book on what *Pamela* did for fictional romance is that a work can exist as a product of religious views on marriage and also as a form of pornography.

Watt is clearly not the only scholar that comments on the repetitive arch of the narrative structure, but he was one of the first. Even though so much time has passed since Watt's initial piece, the romance novel, or society's thoughts on what to expect from a romance novel, has not changed all that much. There is an inherent expectation when picking up a novel that is marketed as a romance to have a pleasurable reading experience that ends with two people falling in love and living happily ever after. This expectation can cloud the reading experience and inhibit the reader's understanding of how influential the romance structure is as a plot device.

Decades after Watt published his novel, Peter Brooks published a monograph on reading books for their plot. Of most importance in his work is his proposal to combine both literary criticism and psychoanalysis in order to explain the role of desire in narrative (Brooks, 1985). Desire here, I argue, is twofold—desire of the characters in the novel and the desire of the reader to envy the romance of the story. Decades later, in his more recent work, he warns both reader and author away from a rigid narrative arch. The relationship that the reader has with the inelastic structure of the romance plot is arguably sensual in nature. There is an effect of kindness–caring for the characters– and a feeling of knowing that at the end of the reading they will be satisfied.

Chapter 2: The *Normal People* Effect

Sally Rooney, a critically acclaimed Irish novelist, is most well-known for her 2019 eccentric narrative *Normal People* which wishes to make the reader question whether they, or the characters, will be satisfied. This novel catalogs the hectic relationship between two adolescents navigating life and is set within the same world of Rooney's own upbringing. A hallmark of Rooney's writing is the fact that it is heavily characterized by locality and mundane and in some ways mirrors her own development. Her mother's love of the local art scene coupled with a rigorous Roman Catholic high school education fueled Rooney's writing into one that focused heavily on intimacy, politics, and partnership outside of marriage. Her time at Trinity College in Dublin also serves as a point of motivation for her unique writing style (intentional lack of quotation marks coupled with heavy implantation of text message discourse) as she spent much of her time reading the classics and worked hard to secure her spot as the number-one competitive debater in England at age 22 (Dubey). The intersection of her education and unique art-positive upbringing propelled her into the literary scene.

Heralded as "the Salinger for the Snapchat generation", Rooney couples her interest in anomalous romance with that of unconventional written prose techniques (i.e., intentional lack of quotation marks, insertion of email and text conversations, and chapter designation by time passed since character interaction) to create novels centered around questions of partnership and how love can exist outside of the box that genre has created for it (Dubey). The *pas de deux* nature of *Normal People's* two main characters' interactions prompts many questions about what type of novel this text really is. In one sense this novel seems to promise to follow the standard narrative of a romance text while on the other hand it describes a set of romantic and communicative failures.

The text follows two high achieving students, Marianne and Connell, as they navigate sex, class inequity, abuse, and identity. Before we are introduced to the characters it is clear through the descriptors of their access, homelife, and parental jobs (Connell's mother cleans Marianne's family home) that there is a stark class difference between the two. This becomes the first of many imbalances the two must work to figure out in order to maintain the fragile stability of their relationship. After a short-lived and very secretive fling in high school, the prose takes the reader on a complicated journey through the duo's lives as they attempt to discover what a normal life means and whether or not they were meant to be permanent figures in each other's lives.

Marianne comes from a wealthy family where her career-driven mother is largely absent while her brother is verbally and physically abusive. She is described as intelligent yet struggles to find her footing amongst her peers in high school. The verbal abuse she suffers from both her brother and peers situates her in social and home settings as abnormal– with different modes of abnormality being a central struggle for both Marianne and Connell. Connell's high school experience relies heavily on his success on the rugby team–a *major* status symbol in his peer group–and being friends with the 'in-crowd'. It was these situations that gave Connell an underlying comportment of natural passivity in social settings which sets the tone for the rest of his journey. His mother had him when she was a teenager and works as a cleaner for Marianne's family, making their relationship awkward because of the stark difference in class inequality. Their seemingly spontaneous interactions at various points in life and development offer a diagnostic look into a romance in which the relationship at the end of the novel does not feature a traditionally happy couple.

Their relationship is centered around the act of a passive refusal. By this I mean that they refuse to acknowledge their connection–whether this be in public or private–and this is a key factor of their relationship and the novel itself. By keeping their relationship hidden they appear to avoid the forms of scrutiny and normative pressure that would situate their romance within the broader sphere of social relations. The passivity of this secrecy is in some ways a form of action, setting them apart through a specific refusal of normality. Their relationship is an exact negation of a typical romance. This specific awareness of actions done or not done in the name or with the idea of someone else is crucial to understanding the inner workings of Marianne and Connell's relationship.

Connell and Marianne were hesitant to get together because of various factors including their class difference and social circles at school, but once they did these aspects of their connection fought into the very soul of the pairing. In the early months of their partnership, the two seem to be overcome with the confusion they feel towards each other while also being concerned at knowing how consuming this confusion is. This consumption felt is also arguably passive as there is no action taken to combat it.

Connell finds himself attempting to put these feelings he has towards Marianne into words, feels embarrassed at how breathless he becomes, and "turns a new page in the notebook so he doesn't have to look at what he's done" (Rooney, 27). Connell is faced with a choice here that resembles many of the choices his life seems to become riddled with–one of his own doings. Additionally, Connell's passivity here quickly becomes a hallmark of his personality and, in turn, their tumultuous yet affectionate relationship. Marianne uses Connell's passivity as a type of soil to grow without knowing that she is using Connell's stem as much-needed support. The passive conduct of Connell when he refuses to come to terms with the emotional aspect of his

seemingly purely physical relationship with Marianne feeds into the struggles these two have with defining a normal life and normal relationship.

Chapter 3: Pursuing Normality

Rooney works to examine aspects of normality through the lens of two high school aged characters making their way through the mundane. For the purpose of this thesis ideas of normality will be drawn from Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life.* Warner's account of normality enables an understanding of the social production of certain bodies as normal and all others as abnormal while shedding light on the arbitrary and hierarchical characteristics that dictate these placements. Among the most influential of these characteristics is a sexual body's politics. Warner labels this idea as the "hierarchy of sex" which "sometimes serve no real purpose except to prevent sexual variance" (Warner, 25). The separation of 'good sex' from 'bad sex' is *heavily* influenced by the hegemonic and heteronormative– with the heteronormative and pure body being crucially tied to 'good sex'. Warner makes it very clear that anybody placed on the wrong side will be stigmatized in "a way that could entail real damage" (Warner, 26).

What does it mean to be normal? What kind of rules and regulations are in place to push individuals to want to choose and strive towards the normal? Warner suggests statistics. Data and numbers are a trusted institution to point us towards normal. Additionally, the trust in mass popular culture invites people to "make an implicit comparison between themselves and the mass of other bodies" (Warner, 54). The sheer number of individuals partaking in normality make the outliers even more noticeable; thus, the appeal to strive towards the in-crowd. However, there is no plausible reason to want to be normal–furthermore, normality and achieving it, is impossible. It is a construct that must exist in order for authority to exert its power.

Rooney's *Normal People* poses the question "What is a normal person and how would a normal person act?" This central question becomes a key theme in the unfolding of character

development and romantic relationships at work in this text. As Rooney works to establish normal in tension with the abnormal, Marianne and Connell also begin to work on their own definitions of these common terms. However, their definitions and understandings only work because of each other. Marianne's initial understanding of normal is of how Connell acts within his social circles and Connell's initial understanding of normality is how he acts when him and Marianne are alone. The couple are not mutually exclusive, both physically and emotionally, and must function as parts of a whole rather as individualistic components of two distinct personalities.

Marianne endeavors to make sense of how she feels at odds with herself, along with a different kind of at odds with Connell when she remarks that "the difference was not happening inside herself, in her personhood, but in between them, in the dynamic" (Rooney, 14). Here Rooney is able to demonstrate the delicate beauty of their peculiarly intense relationship. Rooney's pursuit of toying with this dynamic to create an urge to anticipate the tension between them further defines their intricate relationship. The 'in-between' that exists for Marianne and Connell is simultaneously the site of their problems and their purest form of love because of the outside constraints of normality.

Normality in this novel begins to explore a twofold definition: one within the context of interpersonal relationships and one that seems to exist in a world (the 'in-between') that only Marianne and Connell have access to. The two are individually seeking normalcy in their own lives through academic and career related pursuits but seem to only find it in moments with each other. What makes it even more complex is that they struggle to identify as normal and only truly believe that the other is normal, and is comfortable being so. The complexity of their relationship is advanced through their constant "passing through" of each other's lives. Marianne

and Connell's relationship is based upon an inherent, yet unknown to either of them, ability to leave and then seamlessly come back into each other's lives. There is never a point in their time together where they are unsure they will forget each other or never see each other again. There is an invisible string pulling them together whilst also unspooling in order to give them space.

In terms of normalcy the couple seems to exemplify these qualities in moments alone. Without the peering eyes of the world and the worry about what others would think– Marianne and Connell can act and speak as a 'regular' couple. The abnormal actions of their relationship come with the uncoupling via outside pressures (such as, academic demands, familial pressure, social status). Due to this fact, there is an interesting counter-marriage plot at work here in Rooney's world. The two are aware of the unconventional nature of their relationship while also being aware that it is the only thing keeping them in each other's lives.

The key part to the development of plot in this novel is the fact that the two are constantly uncoupling. The reader begins to question whether or not they should be "rooting" for the two to get together or if the beauty of their relationship comes from the fact that they are consistently nostalgic for each other's company–without truly ever getting enough of it. Examining the pair as a duo that survives on an inconsistent time together begs to be analyzed as something opposite to the classic marriage plot whilst still being a novel about romance. This novel would not be able to move forward without them uncoupling and it is that exact fact which makes this novel a unique twist on the romance novel.

In the text there is a pivotal moment when Marianne and Connell see each other again after their somber break-up following Connell's abandoning Marianne for the more popular girl Rachel for the Debs dance, and Marianne having a traumatic family-related mental breakdown. Connell is speaking with a man, Gareth, at a party and their drastic difference in

socio-economic status is clear. Connell reluctantly follows him around the party which leads into an impromptu and surprising introduction to Gareth's girlfriend Marianne.

There are several key aspects of their first interaction in college that contribute to their nostalgic love for each other which is fueled by the inherent knowledge that their time together is inconsistent and nonlinear. Their positions of power within social groups have *clearly* switched. Marianne is surrounded by peers who are compelled to physically face her and stop speaking when she looks away from them and at Connell. In this interaction Marianne is described by how those around her are experiencing the scenario yet with Connell the reader receives a glimpse into what he takes note of as he sees Marianne. He first notices "her hand, holding the cigarette" and that it "looks long and ethereal in the light" (Rooney, 75).

The significance of Connell placing Marianne as celestial and divine while seeing her in the midst of in-person social interactions cannot go overlooked. Connell is arguably overcome with her presence and the fact that she is willing to recognize him. This is a significant resonance to earlier in the novel when Connell joked at the idea of their relationship being public knowledge in their high school and Marianne very seriously remarking that she "would never pretend not to know you" (Rooney, 28). Their relationship feeds on these moments and holds on to them as if they are anticipating a fast with an indeterminate number of days.

Chapter 4: Beauty as a Constructed Idea

Another key piece of this interaction to look at is their collective ideas of beauty. Connell has always believed Marianne to be attractive but never beautiful. In this interaction, however, Connell takes time to note the specific details of outer beauty that Marianne has seemed to begin giving attention to while also reminiscing on the imperfect parts of her that he feels special for noticing. He gazes upon her crooked teeth while also noticing that she is wearing a dark shade of lipstick. On Marianne's side she is distantly uncomfortable yet wildly self-aware that she has grown into herself and her beauty. She coyly remarks "It's classic me, I came to college and got pretty" (Rooney, 82). By saying this Marianne is establishing a mutual understanding that the two can once again recognize that there is something special happening between the two of them, and that her external beauty now matches how Connell has always viewed her.

Marianne acknowledging her own beauty as something that she has grown into and was not born with is crucial to understanding how beauty works in their relationship. Additionally, there is a subliminally idea that Marianne only believes herself to be pretty because of what others have told her pretty is. In *'I Feel Pretty': Beauty as an Affective-Material Process* Toni Ingram explores the conceptualization of beauty through an "ontological shift in how girls, bodies and beauty are understood" (Ingram, 2022). The article produces a feminist analysis of beauty to move beyond beauty as something that can only be oppressive or problematic. Ingram discusses how the idea of beauty, and a feminine body are positioned as clearly separate "where beauty norms work to constrain, objectify or empower the feminine subject" (Ingram, 2022). This gives depth to Marianne's inner feelings about her beauty and how they are always struggling against how society creates beauty as purposefully unattainable. Ingram works to

examine the body as a process rather than something stable in order to view beauty as something that creates and thrives on possibility.

In the case of Marianne and Connell beauty for them is absolutely an act of becoming. As mentioned above, Marianne believes that beauty was not only something that she became but something that was self-fulfilling. By fortifying beauty as an "emergent phenomenon" it can allow us to understand how Marianne and Connell believe beauty to be more than something attributed to a body (Ingram, 2022). Marianne and Connell are in a sense forced to create how beauty inhabits a body.

Chapter 5: Nostalgic Love

Finally, the idea of nostalgia and timing is portrayed here in relation to their uncoupling. The two fostered a relationship during high school yet when Marianne expresses that she misses him Connell finds "the directness, coming so soon and so unexpectedly, [and] makes him blush" (Rooney, 76). He is unable to think of Marianne as someone who is also growing and developing, and instead believes Marianne is static in her feelings for him when they are not physically together. Connell and Marianne's connection is as based upon their time apart as it is on their time together. Thus, their conceptual idea of what a relationship is is based upon an uncoupling.

In addition to themes of uncoupling the centrality that love is placed into is erratic. Even though this story is about their love for each other, the fact that their unique type of love leads to personal development cannot go unnoticed. Due to their unique relationship history and how the novel is structured, the reader gets an uncommon glimpse into their psyche and feelings. As a result of this, the way love is portrayed gets deliberately construed as nonlinear and forces one to look into how love, both platonic and sexual, can exist.

Connell's development is inherently tied to Marianne's yet also independent of hers in terms of what he must go through, not alone, but without Marianne. Additionally, it cannot go unnoticed how Connell's mental health is linked to his social environment. When surrounded by his peers in high school in a positive social environment Connell does not have to really delve into the depression stewing within him. When he gets to college, however, he realizes that the happiness he felt never truly came from within and was always a byproduct of those around him. Connell begins to experience panic attacks and notes that he felt as if "the whole cognitive framework by which he made sense of the world had disintegrated for good, and everything from

then on would just be undifferentiated sound and color" (Rooney, 213). Connell is almost tearing away from reality as he matures and comes to an existential point in life where he can only look at the past as the times when he was truly happy.

Marianne has an opposite experience to Connell. Her experiences deal heavily with physical appearance and sexual encounters. Marianne was the social outcast in high school and as she moves into higher education, she becomes more focused on her personal appearance as her social relationships solidify. She was socialized to think of herself as a non-sexualized object, except when with Connell and the reader sees her weave through life chasing their intimacy. Additionally, Marianne's sexual experiences post-Connell are linked to violence and shame. She begins to question if a purer, kinder love even exists: "Is the world such a place, that love should be indistinguishable from the basest and most abusive forms of violence?" (Rooney, 205).

The pivotal moment that ends this novel defines a generation of young people searching for love driven by the nostalgia of a simple youth. Marianne and Connell believed, deep down, that inconsistency was what defined their time together–yet a love and growth is what came of it. The final pages of the novel describe Marianne and Connell reflecting on their time together in an existential way. They know that they must part–Connell has an opportunity to advance his academic career in the United States–but they fear what a deliberate choice to be thousands of miles apart will do to them. Will they be able to be normal without each other?

Marianne believes it to be possible. In a way she has come full circle, ready to begin again after he "brought her goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her" (Rooney, 273). She finally accepts that two people can actually do good for one another: a 'good' strong enough to let them lead their own lives, truly. After resembling two vines twisting and weaving around

each other just trying to see how tall they could climb they have come to consensus that "people can really change one another" (Rooney, 273).

Chapter 6: Jane Austen as a Potential Solution

Jane Austen is often heralded as the originator of the female novel for her intricate and complex character dynamics centered around women and her development of morals as intertwined with status. Many of her works are reflective of her own family life as neither she nor her elder sister married and were in the throes of regency social society. The idea of being normal within the context of an Austen novel is heavily tied to proper social interactions and how well a character seems to follow a "correct" life course.

Furthermore, to draw from Michel Foucault's concept of author-function, Austen has become an authority on moral philosophy. Foucault writes that historically, concepts "assume a relatively weak and secondary position in relation to the solid and fundamental role of an author and his works" (Foucault, 115). In outlining this theory, he is able to convey the impact of linking the author to their works as well as the impact of not doing so. Furthermore, the author-function assists in understanding and forming important discourses around authors. Austen's novels come with the expectation of being told, in some way, how to have a good life. She is able to create a universe of sorts through her novels where her readers are comfortable with the narrative arc of the romance story.

Jane Bennet, in *Pride and Prejudice* arguably offers a view for the reader to explore how such a sweet-tempered girl of the period hopes to follow the rules in order to end up happily married. In terms of moral status, Jane's is inherently defined by her refusal to think poorly of anyone else. When Jane and Elizabeth are reflecting on their interactions with Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy at the Meryton ball, Jane refuses to say anything critical about the men she has liked before enjoying the company of Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth aptly responds that "All the world are

good and agreeable in your eyes. I never heard you speak ill of a human being in my life" (Austen, 16).

Jane's inability to speak critically about anyone has implications both interpersonally and figuratively. Within the novel this quality places Jane's character in a place of moral high ground without positioning her as equal with the pompous characters of the novel. Additionally, the way that Austen utilizes Jane to create a positive, relative normalcy to view against Elizabeth is done purposefully and with the intention to portray comparisons. Austen's setting up normalcy as inherent to marital connections is also crucial to the placement of her within the literary canon.

This leads to examining Austen under a feminist lens that is both critical yet kairotic. Critical in the sense that the 21st century feminism does not look to Austen as explanatory for where feminist movements are today and kairotic in the sense that in her own time she was making a point necessary for the nascent women's movement. Jane Austen's type of feminism must be understood as relative to the time period.

Jane Austen's writing career intricately overlaps with the Regency Period which heavily influenced her writing and its contextual plots. The Regency Era politically began in 1811 "when King George III went permanently insane and his son George, Prince of Wales, was sanctioned to rule England in his place as regent" (Aschkenes). Aschkenes argues that a concern over property and money status was shaping the social landscape and strict inheritance laws funneled all property to male relatives. This passing of large country estates becomes a "symbol of the wealth and power of the landed gentry" in *Pride and Prejudice* (Aschkenes).

Another hallmark of this era as described by Aschkenes were that marriage and gender roles were closely tied to questions of land ownership and inheritance. The culture in Britain

became "increasingly focused on the accumulation and concentration of wealth within the family" (Aschkenes). The idea of the family as a collective motivated by wealth placed a great deal of pressure on women to have advantageous marriages. This, coupled with the publishing of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman*, reinforced the idea that women should be the rational counterpart to men. Austen's novels were a direct commentary on this Wollstoncraftian conception of gender.

Additionally, the print culture and its role in the development of the novel is explored by Aschkenes. During Austen's lifetime "almost everyone in the middle classes and above could read, and literacy rates for the rest of the population rose steadily thereafter" (Aschkenes). By the end of Austen's life, the novel was the commanding force and main mode of consumption for literature in England. The increase in circulation and promotion made some books more accessible yet the 'taxes on knowledge' made "the kind [of novel] Austen published … an unaffordable luxury for a great deal of the population" (Aschkenes). Nevertheless, Austen installed the realist novel in the popular culture of 19th century England and showcased the intricacies of the mundane domestic life.

At the time of its publishing, it can be argued that the character of Elizabeth Bennet is a representation of feminism for this novel yet more difficult to argue that the novel is a feminist representation that has withstood the test of time. Elizabeth's actions cannot exist in isolation and therefore the type of feminism at work here needs to be understood relatively. As mentioned previously, Elizabeth is placed in comparison to her sister's actions and thus any abnormal actions she takes are amplified and made to be more feminist than they are.

Austen portrays feminism in this novel as a negated version of the marriage market. More specifically, the actions of Elizabeth in the novel that can be argued as feminist

are all centered around her acting in opposition to the typical "lady-like" path set out by her predecessors to make marriages of advantage. Towards the end of the first volume, Lizzy is faced with a marriage proposal from Mr. Collins, her cousin. He has done so as an act of pity so she can continue to live in her family home and because his patroness has ordered him to find a wife.

After Mr. Collins expresses the "violence of [his] affections" Lizzy understands that he is offering her something sensible–something that would afford her a continuation of her comfortable life; however, she feels "it is impossible for [her] to do otherwise than decline" (Austen, 104). Lizzy's choice here is arguably one of her more feminist moves as she is choosing the opposite of what any "sensible" girl of her age and standing would do. However, it is also important to consider that she is just denying *this* proposal and not marriage entirely. She does wish to marry–in fact, she is so adamant about the seriousness of marriage that she will only do so if all criteria are met. At the top of this list of specifications for matrimony is love and intelligence—she wishes to find a mental and physical counterpart.

These two pieces are so crucial to Lizzy's idea of a perfect future that she begins to conflate and misunderstand how relative these terms are. By saying this I mean to imply that her views on love and intelligence *need* to be different from those of her sisters'. She needs to, and is portrayed to, experience these feelings, and detect these characteristics differently and more deeply than anyone else. It is this action of 'feeling other' that places Lizzy not only outside of the normal but in her own quasi-feminist bubble. Lizzy's otherness as placed opposite to the correct female path designates both Lizzy and Jane as characters to look to as a female model. Austen's novels overall create a norm that negotiates life through the act of marriage and the capacity of characters within her novels to read other characters. This becomes the crucial

difference between Jane as a typical character and Elizabeth as the character we should model our life after.

Chapter 7: The Miscommunication Trope

A recurring element in *Normal People, Pride and Prejudice,* and the rigid structure of the romance novel is the miscommunication trope which is most commonly seen through the 'third-act breakup'. The frustration of miscommunication in Rooney's *Normal People* depends on Marianne and Connell's inability to read not only each other but the peers in their social circles. The awkwardness that is inherent to the way they interact with others is not viewed as a lack in social development but more so as a quirk that each of them deal with differently. Connell does not realize that he struggles with communicating his exact feelings until he is no longer the center of a high-status social group. Marianne seems to hold onto her tendency to miscommunicate and only open toward communication when she becomes aware of her higher social status in college. Their inability to read others would have done them a huge disservice in the world of Austen's novels as being able to read others and communicate correctly and effectively is crucial to the forms of social development that Austen's novels render normative.

Communication in each of these novels plays a significant role in how ideas like love and intelligence are portrayed and experienced. In Austen, the letters exchanged by the characters offer the reader a unique experience by getting to understand each of the character's written voice and how they choose to structure and disclose certain information to different characters. In Rooney, the text and email communications between Marianne and Connell display their conversations with each other while not physically close to one another and help the reader understand how they maintain their relationship.

Additionally, these forms of written communication offer an understanding of how miscommunication functions within both Rooney's and Austen's novels. The

miscommunication trope is unique in how it offers a point of stress for the reader whilst simultaneously making them feel forced to read on and answer the question: will they figure it all out? Additionally, the characters themselves then base all their actions on their personal understanding of the miscommunication situations.

In Austen's novel Lizzy and Mr. Darcy have a misunderstanding regarding Darcy's role in Jane's failed engagement with Mr. Bingley in the beginning of the novel and his tumultuous relationship with Mr. Wickham. Lizzy is under the assumption that Darcy ruined the potential happiness of her favorite sister, Jane by tarnishing the Bennet family's reputation to Bingley. Due to this, she is led to believe Mr. Wickham's side of the story on how he was 'fooled and robbed' by Mr. Darcy and is heavily embarrassed when she encounters Darcy whilst visiting his estate in Pemberley.

All of this is put to rest via a letter written by Mr. Darcy. He, quite formally and without hints of romance, lays out the offenses that were laid against him and thoughtfully attempts to inform Lizzy on his motivations and reasoning. Towards the end of his letter, he writes "Detection could not be in your power, and suspicion certainly not in your inclination" (Austen, 197). This turn of phrase is crucial to understand as it confirms Darcy's respect for Lizzy in a way that continually places her as 'not like other girls'. He, in a sense, is respectful of her hatred towards him because she did not snoop and gossip to get the full story and instead took people's word as gospel. Her attention and respect shown during this social situation, which had potential to tarnish her entire family's reputation, made her more desirable as a potential bride.

This idea that Lizzy's attractive actions are thought of as so because they are normative for her gender cannot go without notice. Additionally, these actions were only thought of as respectable by Darcy because he was attempting to solve their miscommunication. The

destructive nature of this miscommunication trope in literature is inherently utilized as a tool for the female character to be seen as an other that can only be recognized as such by an equally intelligent and different male counterpart.

In a manner that is resonant of both Austen and the romance genre in general, Rooney's reader is exposed to the pulse of the detrimental effects of miscommunication. A specific example that encapsulates the particular multi-level miscommunication at work in Marianne and Connell's relationship is when he is struggling with money to pay rent and assumes that he cannot stay with her at her place. Their class difference had always played an interesting role in their relationship and in having the female character be the one with wealth is a deliberate choice by Rooney to further her and give her a more interesting mental development because her physical life was implied to be 'taken care of'.

The interaction between the two is so severe yet they are only ever exchanging a couple of words at a time. Their relationships communicate so much beyond the verbal–which normally works for them but this is a moment in which it fails. Due to the fact that Connell will have to be home for three months he guesses that Marianne will want to break their romantic relationships. She responds, "in a voice that struck him as truly cold… 'Sure'" (Rooney, 129). This interaction, much like the coffee they shared, was literally and figuratively unfinished. They have relied so heavily on picking up on each other's unsaid cues that they became almost paralyzed by these spoken communications.

This moment causes so much strain on their relationship and also their personal lives. Marianne enters a relationship that is physically abusive, and Connell experiences a deep depression. This miscommunication in their lives creates situations caused by a lack of control. This physically abusive relationship that Marianne enters into can be looked at as

reactionary from a standard liberal feminist perspective in a sense that she needed someone to control her external life and body. This action's motivation can nevertheless also be thought of as moving away from the centerline of normalcy in ways that do not cohere with any recognized or sanctioned political position.

Chapter 8: Exploration of a New Type of Bildungsroman

A potential way to answer the multitude of questions based on how to read and interact with these types of novels is the Bildungsroman. Amalie Due Svendsen argues that one of the most famous romance novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, should not be read as a romance but instead as a Bildungsroman because of Elizabeth Bennet's development. Svendsen brings up a romance novel scholar, Pamela Regis, who firmly places *Pride and Prejudice* within the romance novel canon as it fits all requirements of the female protagonist and her focus on an opportunistic marriage.

To fully understand the closeness of these genres the two need to be fully understood and defined. The Svendsen piece references M.H. Abrams' classic *A Glossary of Literary Terms* which clearly defines a romance novel as: "love stories that focus on the heroine rather than the hero, in which, after diverse obstacles have been overcome, the plots end happily with the betrothal or marriage of the lovers" (Abrams). The idea of a Bildungsroman has definitions that are both wide and narrow. The definition of the genre itself can be dated back to Germany in the 18th century by German philologist Karl Morgenstern and was further defined by Willhem Dilthey. Dilthey described the Bildungsroman as a novel that "examines a regular course of development in the life of the individual…The dissonance and conflicts of life appear as the necessary transit points of the individual on his way to maturity and harmony" (Svendsen). Another key piece of this genre is the character going through some sort of transformative journey.

The aforementioned journey, whether physical and/or mental, is crucial to understanding the need to create and reform a genre and space for reading these novels. It is equally crucial to understand the importance that gender roles play in these respective pieces in their time

periods. As referenced before, the Regency era placed particular pressures on women to make advantageous marriages in order to maintain social status and money to survive whereas the 21st century gender expectations displayed in *Normal People* are closely tied to sexual relationships. To examine these facets more closely the path of agency, self-reflection, and reintegration will be explored.

In *Normal People* a moment of agency comes from both Marianne and Connell when she is honest about her abusive brother and Connell decides to publicly take a stand for Marianne. When Marianne appears in front of Connell with a busted nose and tears in her eyes a rage comes over him that is so consuming he has no other choice but to cross the threshold of her home and confront Alan, the brother. He had always been hesitant about people knowing about their relationship, especially their families because of the staunch difference in class, but this was a moment that transcended these other aspects that made them different. When he confronts Alan he says very clearly, with a tone that only someone full of passion could muster, “Say one bad thing to her ever again and I’ll come back here myself and kill you, that’s it” (Rooney, 259).

Connell has never so forcefully, and in not an inherently romantic way, defended Marianne from harm in this way. He almost entered a state of liminal existence in which his only thought was to make sure that no one would ever hurt her ever again. He could not stand the thought that his own biases or limitations would prevent him from helping someone that means so much to him and has assisted him in his personal and mental growth. This is a moment in their relationship where the two realize that they will be forever intertwined because of what they were able to protect each other from.

The moment of self-reflection comes directly following the confrontation of Alan and Connell. As the two pull away in their car Connell notes that “overhead trees wave silvery individual leaves in silence” (Rooney, 260). This demonstrates that even though the two have been so reliant on each other in the past they can ultimately acknowledge that they have allowed each other to grow into people that can stand on their own. It is a frequent theme throughout the novel in which Marianne and Connell are compared to vines that grow around each other and that pull energy from the same sun, yet it has never been explained as such that two meanings can be pulled from the fact that there are individual leaves and that there are moving in silence.

Their moment of reintegration happens as many of their closest moments do–without either of them noticing the extent to which they have affected each other. Their reintegration is literal in a sense and yet also figurative as the confines of their influence on each other are difficult to place boundaries on. In a sense they can accept that their view of normalcy is inherently shaped by each other. In the seven months after that both Marianne and Connell both finally realize and embrace the good that they have done for each other. They acknowledge that neither of them could have lived without the other.

Marianne is now able to live a life where she is no longer the object of people’s torture or sexual abuse. She notes that she is neither “admired nor reviled” (Rooney, 261). She understands that she can simply exist in the world without being forced to perform a certain way for the people around her. She no longer feels an intense pressure to mold herself into an object for those around her to feel comfortable around or mold herself in order to feel comfortable with herself. She truly understands the peace of no longer having to exist for the benefit of others and instead can get to know herself again.

Connell finds a headspace that he feels secure in. Security was always something Connell not only sought after but feared when he had it. Connell's instinct to hide his relationship with Marianne in high school was based on his perceived lack of security within his social group. Yet at the end of the novel, he feels secure enough in himself to take on an academic journey that would require him to have full independence and confidence in his intelligence. He struggles with the idea of doing something without her direct approval even going so far as to say, "Say you want me to stay and I will" (Rooney, 273). It is Marianne who then reflects and realizes that she cannot, and they cannot, hold on to each other and hold each other back at the same time.

Pride and Prejudice features the same intricate stages of development. In terms of agency, Elizabeth's own indifference towards her appearance can be analyzed as a form of agency that works to undermine certain gender stereotypes that hold up their society. It also reflects her lack of thought about how her sex influences how her actions are perceived. There is a unique form of agency at work here because it is a form of refusal and resistance rather than an action directed towards an outcome. Elizabeth is creating and using the only kind of agency available to women in this time period by not fulfilling the ideals and expectations of her sex. For example, when Jane falls ill on her trip to Netherfield and Elizabeth walks to go visit her she comes "with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise" (Austen, 33). Her appearance created quite the stir with the eldest Bingley sister and was overall not received very well.

Lizzy's reflective state in the novel comes when she spends time away with her Aunt and Uncle. Whilst on this journey their carriage breaks down and makes a stop at Darcy's home, Pemberley. The family is shown the gallery room where Lizzy happens upon a stone bust of Mr.

Darcy. Austen writes that "she stood several minutes before the picture in earnest contemplation, and returned to it again before they quitted the gallery" (Austen, 240). Lizzy had not had an opportunity to reflect on Darcy's involvement in her sister's failed engagement with Bingley, and this ponderous moment allows for a state of internal reflection in which she begins to understand the consequences of her actions.

The final move in *Pride and Prejudice* that completes the Bildungsroman stages is a conversation Lizzy has with her father after accepting a marriage proposal from Mr. Darcy. It showcases a reconstruction of sorts because it demonstrates Lizzy entering society, following the "correct" social/marital pattern, and doing so of her own volition. She remarks on her previous thoughts saying, "How earnestly did she then wish that her former opinions had been more reasonable, her expressions more moderate?" (Austen, 355). Lizzy recognizes that she was protecting her pride by forming initial reactions to people on her own preconceived notions.

Both of these novels contain romance but are not wholly about romance. In fact, I argue that in doing so you are doing a disservice to each of these piece's complexities. A reading centered around the tenets of a Bildungsroman will offer a broader understanding of the personal development of each character as individuals as opposed to only understanding them as a part of a whole. Austen attempts to do this, and Rooney offers a clearer picture of a romance composed of individuals.

Chapter 9: The Impact of the Austen Industry

How far have we come? Unfortunately, since Austen we have not come too far. Austen's legacy has attached itself to popular culture and romantic comedies. There is an industry built upon the satisfaction of the marriage plot. A variety of current media in the romance genre is consistently showcasing the marriage plot—because Austen proved it worked. Austen's authority over this narrative arc has solidified so solidly that there is no questioning of its repetition.

For example, the 1995 film *Clueless* is a direct remake of the novel *Emma* by Jane Austen. The titular Emma lives with her father, admired by all, and faces her first setback in life when she attempts matchmaking. The overlaps in Clueless are major as each major character has their own counterpart in the novel. Of most importance is the lack of questioning the repetitive nature of this narrative pattern. Furthermore, the effect of this genre's popularity has solidified the importance of commodifying a woman's life path.

This commodification has had a direct impact on a woman's reproductive expectations as well. Many feminist critiques against the family–the very goal all women should be working to achieve–are geared towards contesting this ideal. Specifically, Sophie Lewis adds to this discourse in her book *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* by expressing her feelings towards the surrogacy industry as proof that any type of body taking part in gestation is performing labor. Labor here is reframed in order to argue for the intensity of the physical and emotional labor that happen during pregnancy.

I argue that by using labor as a lens in which to analyze not only pregnancy but a woman's life. Lewis argues for pregnancy to be viewed as labor in order to examine the "working conditions" (experience with hospitals and doctors, access to pre and post pregnancy

care, financial capabilities) of the industry of obstetrics. There is a reason that pregnancy has become the way it is and that is because we made it that way–which also means we have the capability to change it. The labor surrounding motherhood can and should become a choice and Lewis suggests that full surrogacy is an "expression of solidarity with the evolving desires of gestational workers, *from the point of view of a struggle against work"* and a framework that can be used to abolish the nuclear family by creating larger systems of care where one no longer has to rely on purely blood relations (Lewis, 28).

Additionally, Angela McRobbie explores the space that post-feminist discourses have on contemporary women in varying institutions. She argues that post-feminism exercises feminist thought but in a way that "suggests that equality is achieved in order to…emphasize that it is no longer needed" (McRobbie, 255). In using this framework, she is able to analyze the paradigm shift that follows the move away from feminist action and the move towards the "taken into acountness" of the so-called achievement of a feminist utopian society (McRobbie, 256). With this ideology integrated into the popular culture sphere, McRobbie allows for a way in which to view the 'young woman' as the expression of gender anxiety while also embracing their sexuality.

By utilizing McRobbie's idea of the young woman to view the more contemporary feminist scene in the general pop culture arena we can easier analyze the more ironic view taken by female identified individuals on the normative life path. The 'young woman' looks to Lizzy Bennet in a mocking way while also being ironically jealous of her happy ending. Simultaneously, the young woman looks to the characters of Marianne and Connell and relates to the situational nature of their relationship. The push towards a new age of a feminist romance

novel must be centered upon not the character's love towards each other but how they work individually to make themselves more capable of an impactful love.

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