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READING SAD GIRL LITERATURE: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPLICATIONS OF AN
EMERGING GENRE THROUGH CLOSE READINGS OF *NORMAL PEOPLE* AND *MY
YEAR OF REST AND RELAXATION*

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ABSTRACT

There are many factors to consider when examining an emerging trend in literature. What books fit into the conditions of the trend? What authors? Are there limitations, critiques, and analyses to be had? These aspects are important to consider, whether you are a publisher looking to profit, or a reader looking to keep up with popular novels, or—like myself—perhaps an English student recognizing recurring patterns in their peers’ choice of fiction.

When assessing the online popularity of “Sad Girl Literature”—an emerging genre of literature that places older canonical works under the same umbrella as contemporary, millennial novels—these factors play a distinct role in understanding what Sad Girl Lit can offer a modern literary world. Marrying a close reading of two successful novels within the trending genre—Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*—with critical think-pieces that have arisen in the wake of the contentious new genre, I aim to explore the effects of Sad Girl Literature, including its readership’s relationship to it, the author’s abilities to create works of literary value, and the implications of a possible emerging deficiency in textual analysis amongst the younger generations of readers. Sad Girl Lit is a broad genre by nature, including works from *Jane Eyre* to Didion to Rooney. How to approach defining what makes all of these far-reaching authors fit within one category remains difficult, but in unlocking textual evidence and analyzing critiques of the apathetic women embodied in so many of the stories, one can begin to understand how the thread is connected.

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Chapter 1

A Framework of Sad Girl Lit and Related Writings.

The Emergence of Sad Girl Literature

The “cult of the literary sad woman”—as it is put by Leslie Jamison in a 2019 *New York Times* essay—is not a new literary concept. The idea of the sad girl has persisted as long as literature has; they are defined by their introspection, a persistent sense of isolation and loneliness, and a complex psychological intensity. One of the earliest recorded references to the concept of loneliness comes in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, used to describe Ophelia. The isolation and loneliness of women in literature have taken many forms; in Shakespeare’s early expression of isolation, some scholars demonstrate the relationship between loneliness and female silence (Worsley).

In looking towards what may be modernly conceptualized as Sad Girl Literature, Shakespeare’s early description of female loneliness does not garner his entrance to the cult of the literary sad woman, despite his lasting influence. Instead, the women of Sad Girl Literature must maintain complexity—that is to say, *not* female silence—alongside their loneliness. The discussion of their isolation remains directly related to societal issues that expand beyond their lives. Even in childhood, Jane Eyre stands “lonely enough: but to that feeling of isolation I was accustomed; it did not oppress me much,” (Brontë 72). Novels and authors of great acclaim—Joan Didion, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf—are often included under the modern umbrella of Sad Girl Literature, their themes of female isolation and social ostracization appearing as the

thread to link them all together. What, then, is the merit of this contemporary title of the Sad Girl? How has modern literature continued to light the torch of female loneliness, and perhaps more importantly, what is the value of this loneliness in the works of literature?

The twenty-first-century sad girl embodies the same themes of loneliness that her predecessors do, yet she garners TikTok posts and Instagram photos praising her existence. Extensive criticism and glorification have been given to the sad girl, with some critics noting a “subtext prerequisite,” to the “disaffected, depressed, yet daintily beautiful characters found in books written by Sally Rooney, Sylvia Plath, or Ottessa Moshfegh,” which “also included whiteness” (Haile). The criticisms of privilege, whiteness, and class in Sad Girl Lit ring true when one examines the reading lists presented online. Some of the most prominently featured are works such as *The Bell Jar*, Elif Batuman’s *The Idiot*, “anything by Sally Rooney,” most of Ottessa Moshfegh’s works—but most notably, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*—and Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* (Snape, Egan, Reddit). Aesthetically pleasing photos or videos alongside obscure and cryptic memes of these Sad Girl books can be found on nearly all forms of social media, merging the literature with the perceived persona of the person posting them. A mix of extremely modern novels, as well as more mature works, make their way into the lists, carving new spaces for books that have already existed within established genres. *The Bell Jar*, for example, is a work that was previously most notable as a roman á clef or a piece of psychological fiction but is now perhaps more recognizable to younger readers as a work of Sad Girl Lit—sometimes even heralded as the “OG sad girl book,” in online forums such as Reddit (U/ryetoasttt).

Much of the popularity of Sad Girl Lit seems to stem from the online circles that promote “Sad Girlness” in the first place. While the online popularity of the trend of female sadness and

loneliness is important in understanding the emergence of the defining genre of Sad Girl Lit, it is more valuable to understand the prose of novels that exist within the confines of the categorization. If one is seeking to understand the psychology of the readers of these novels, I imagine they would be able to conduct research quite easily on social media platforms and through the many articles seeking to define the “girlblogger” or the “femcel” (Sherbert, Ward). Instead, I seek to understand the way authors and audiences of Sad Girl Lit alike use loneliness and apparent dissociation as the thread that ties the wide-ranging lists of books together. Alongside this thread, understanding and evaluating the critiques that have arisen in the wake of millennial-riddled Sad Girl Lit and evaluating the tools of literacy employed by the emerging genre’s readers becomes an important aspect in understanding how this genre functions within literature. Looking at the influence of Sad Girl Lit in modern works, I aim to examine two popular novels of the emerging genre: Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*. Many of the reading lists and video recommendations of Sad Girl Lit online include one, if not both, of these highly praised works. Both authors, like their novels, have created prose that seems to herald them and their work as the epicenter of the Sad Girl Lit movement.

Though Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and Rooney’s *Normal People* have distinctly different plots, the basis of their female isolation is strikingly similar and definitively modern. Rooney’s novel of evolving romance features the intelligent, ever-changing Marianne and her lifelong loneliness caused often by her physical appearance—described often as awkward, ugly, or just not quite pretty enough, as well as her wealth and class position. Similarly, Moshfegh’s unnamed narrator in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* revels in a self-inflicted isolation that is similarly defined by her physical appearance and her class, albeit in a

different form. Through this thesis, I seek to examine these similarities of text and understand the value of Sad Girl Lit's relationship to loneliness and isolation while also reflecting on the ways critiques of this emerging genre often seem to fail to recognize intertextual nuances of Sad Girl Literature.

Both evaluated novels are *New York Times* bestsellers, come from award-winning authors, and were published in the past decade. Over one million copies of *Normal People* have been sold and it was recently adapted by Hulu as a miniseries, boasting attractive young actors like Paul Mescal and Daisy Edgar-Jones (Hulu). The praise and relevancy of the two novels are evident and pervasive, making them ideal candidates for close reading and discussion in examining Sad Girl Literature. Though the critical acclaim is important in establishing the novels as dominant features of the emerging genre, I believe the real value of the works is uncovered when we examine, sometimes on a near-microscopic level, the nuance of the prose, its reflection of real-world matters, and the pervasive loneliness of the literary sad woman. Defining what Sad Girl Literature specifically is remains difficult and dependent upon individual readers, but the threads one can draw between themes through close reading of these works endeavors to form a tangible line between the works most often mentioned in the emerging genre. Examining the nuanced writing and the literary value of the authors' scholarship is valuable when attempting to further define the genre but failing to acknowledge this genre's readership and their relationship to close reading (or sometimes, lack thereof) is equally important when attempting to understand the way the genre has grown into an online phenomenon. Modern readers—as well as some critics—focus on the external factors of the novels of Sad Girl Literature to idolize, critique, or discuss the works, often lacking a critical analysis that is supported by intertextual exploration. In considering the surface-level feelings, actions, and descriptions of these characters, it is easy

to reduce the works of Sad Girl Lit to an online trend. While their trendiness is undeniable, the value of the prose and the possibilities of close reading in Sad Girl Literature is often abandoned for a quicker, wittier, and a more internet-forward approach by the modern reader. Thus, coupling close readings of *Normal People* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* with an examination of modern readers' relationships to the emerging genre of Sad Girl Literature, I seek to understand how this genre has formed, the threads that connect it, and the limitations of the genre and its readership.

Previous Understandings of the Emerging Genre

Consequently, the afflicted woman is a longstanding figure in fiction, but Sad Girl Literature within a modern context has been generated distinctly with the new wave of millennial literature. Though millennial literature, or millennial fiction, is somewhat ambiguous in its definition—as is the case with many emerging genres—some scholars define it as “[merged] with the apocalyptic strain across the history of American literature, yet [reflective of] the new information order, social media landscape, and globalized economy,” (Mcclintock). The concept of millennial literature is varied—many scholars focus on the growth of ethnic, cultural, and gendered diversity these novels present, whereas others identify millennial literature as “slacker fiction.” When discussing Moshfeg’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, McClintock identifies its description as “slacker fiction,” but argues that this piece of millennial fiction is more so a novel “fatigue, ennui, and idleness related to underemployment of Millennials,” rather than their “slacking,” (Mcclintock 2022). Besides its place as a key piece of “slacker fiction,” McClintock also relates the novel’s inherent millennial ideas to its existence as a “9/11 novel, the narrator of

which has been seeking oblivion for the year leading up to September 11, only to wake to the horrible reality of that day at the end of the book,” (Mcclintock). Here, Mcclintock identifies one of the most important aspects of the modern literature of millennial authors who live in a post-9/11, post-2008 recession, post-Celtic Tiger, and post-insurrection society—influences that are seemingly undeniable in millennial writing.

Mcclintock makes an important distinction between millennial literature and literature by previous generations, discussing *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* as a book about 9/11 “only by apophasis, studiously avoiding mentioning what the reader already knows and refusing any sentimental identification with the apocalyptic event,” (Mcclintock). In all his valuable identifications of millennial literature, Mcclintock never seems to acknowledge the distinctly feminine issues of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*; the female apathy permeates every aspect of the novel and seems to overshadow the impending doom of 9/11. Even Moshfegh herself is seemingly aware of the way her novel fits into the realm of Sad Girl Lit, noting in an interview with Carmen Maria Machado that *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* “seems to have this one fan group of ... people that call themselves sad girls. And that concerns me, just as someone who was a younger woman with depression,” (Clark). Bearing in mind Moshfegh’s concern regarding the categorization of her work, we begin to grapple with the difficult nature of defining a new genre—especially when its foundations of millennial literature are already uncertain.

Summaries of the Examined Novels

Before beginning textual analysis of Moshfegh and Rooney’s works, it is important to provide some abridgment to the larger works. For the sake of brevity, these synopses will avoid

major introspections into the novels, and instead provide the groundwork necessary to understand the more in-depth close readings to follow.

Beginning with Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*¹, the 2018 novel follows the unnamed narrator on her journey to sleep for a full year following the death of her parents in New York during the early 2000s. In her journey of self-isolation—and seemingly, self-preservation—the narrator takes various types of sleeping pills in an effort to turn “everything, even hatred, even love, into fluff [she] could bat away,” (Moshfegh 166). In the aftermath of her father's slow death from cancer and her mother's recent suicide, the unnamed narrator is defined often by her passivity and even more often by her beauty. *MYR&R* is a repetitively satirical novel that focuses on the narrator's perceived metamorphosis which she continuously works towards in her near-endless sleep. Though she is wealthy (largely from her parents' inheritance), conventionally beautiful, and intelligent, Moshfegh's narrator finds her grief, psychology, and introspection seemingly unbearable. Her best friend, Reva, is similarly intolerable to her, signaling again the loneliness and isolation of the narrator. When she eventually turns her year of sleeping into an art piece with a young artist, a transformation of self is seemingly complete upon her waking. Moshfegh's narrator seeks re-engagement with the world around her. Her awakening is followed swiftly by the events of 9/11, during which Reva—the character's only real friend—is killed while working in the Twin Towers. The story ends with a tangible loneliness that persists—the narrator is still friendless, parentless, and partnerless—but the internal loneliness has shifted from one of passivity to one of possibility.

¹ I will henceforth refer to *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* as *MYR&R*

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* focuses on Marianne and Connell—two complex Irish teenagers living in a small town in Western Ireland. Following their friendship and romantic relationship through teenage years into young adulthood, the novel is set in a post-Celtic tiger Ireland—specifically in the years 2010 through 2015. Rooney spends equal time with Connell and Marianne, and their issues often mirror one another: insecurity, jealousy, anxiety, and class struggles. Despite this, Marianne's isolation and loneliness are most consistent throughout the novel; even when she has friends, she remains “lonely [her] whole life, really,” a sentiment like that of the aforementioned *Jane Eyre* (Rooney 237). Following the tumultuous and often undefined relationship of Connell and Marianne, Rooney explores the complications of romance that come with class differences, social perceptions, physical relationships, and a tendency towards intense self-reflection. Throughout the novel, Marianne experiences shifts in her character which lead to a new independence, confidence, and personal growth, but an underlying melancholia is pervasive in Rooney's writing.

Intentions of Close Reading *Normal People* and *MYR&R*

Looking at the examination of loneliness as related to physical appearance, class, and prevailing mental illness, I aim to examine how both authors create modern portrayals of female isolation through their prose. The poignancy of loneliness has key relations to modern societal expectations and allows these works to exist as worthwhile pieces of Sad Girl Lit with a textual value that extends beyond their online persona. Demonstrating reflections on real-world issues, the sad girls of *MYR&R* and *Normal People* function as mirrors of modern societal discussions, especially those that deal with issues related to the female experience. The longevity of these

themes throughout literature serves to further establish the emerging canon of Sad Girl Lit as one that includes contemporary and classical literature, aiding in stabilizing the genre amidst the changing forms of novels through the years. Throughout many works that make their way onto the Sad Girl Lit lists online, physical appearance and class are often key features in the female figures' lives. Sometimes they are beautiful and wealthy, and despondent nonetheless, or they may be ugly and poor, and this defines their introspection. To understand this connection throughout the genre, we can look once again at Jane Eyre, who in a moment of self-punishment calls upon herself to "draw in chalk your own picture, faithfully, without softening one defect; omit no harsh line, smooth away no displeasing irregularity; write under it, 'Portrait of a Governess, **disconnected, poor, and plain,**'" (Brontë 245). Similar sentiments of societal exclusion at the hands of class and looks are seen in our modern works of Sad Girl Lit, with characters like Marianne who could degrade another person "by association, since she is considered an object of disgust," an alienation which is only furthered by Marianne's difference in wealth, though unlike Jane Eyre, Marianne is considerably wealthier than her peers (Rooney 3).

Chapter 2

Close Reading Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Isolation Related to the Narrator's Physical Appearance

Throughout Moshfegh's *MYR&R*, the narrator is often defined by her desirable looks; even in the throes of her self-ostracization, she is "pretty, still blond and tall and thin," (Moshfegh 93). Her beauty is a point of envy for her best friend, Reva, who is a self-proclaimed "New York three," despite the narrator's description of her as an "8 out of 10," (Moshfegh 13). Though her beauty is a point of recognition for her, with constant comparisons to the likes of Angelina Jolie (though, almost self-referentially, this comparison is specifically regarding Angelina Jolie in *Girl, Interrupted*, another oft-referenced novel in the Sad Girl Lit genre), Kate Moss, and Amber Valletta (Moshfegh 11, 143, 144). One of the most interesting comparisons, however, comes from an internal, fictional conversation the narrator has between herself and Reva. Noticing a haircut she must have gotten while under the influence of her sleeping medication, the narrator weighs the option of cutting her hair even shorter: "Maybe I would enjoy that. Boy cut. *Gamine*. I'd look like Edie Sedgwick. 'You'd look like Charlize Theron,' Reva would have said," (Moshfegh 145). A 1999 *Esquire* article about Charlize Theron describes her as a "California incarnate, with her platinum hair and preternaturally lineless tan...frequently unclothed with a classic face, Marilyn-meets-Kathryn-meets-Rita" (Hylton). The idea of typical American beauty, teeming with inherent sexuality, is how the narrator is most often described by others, despite a differing internal recognition of self. She may have "looked like an off-duty model," but her outward appearance proves inward isolation (Moshfegh 35). Her desire to look

like Edie Sedgwick, coupled with her constant comparison to a prototypical Californian American woman who is oft compared to a sex-symbol status such as the likes of Marilyn Monroe or Rita Hayworth, is reflective of the inner isolation of the narrator in a way other comparisons fail to capture.

Perhaps Moshfegh means this comparison to call forth recollections of Andy Warhol's muse's starring role in the underground film *Poor Little Rich Girl*, a title which would be an apt replacement for *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (Warhol). Or rather, the narrator views her beauty as a trap, and wishing to be free from this trap, makes a comparison that extends outside the realm of the typical 90s and 2000s bombshells with whom she is typically aligned. Separate from the heroin-chic-nineties-look of Angelina Jolie and Kate Moss, Edie Sedgwick represents a look that is as connected to beauty as it is to artisticness. Warhol's use of Sedgwick as a muse is surely still related to her beauty and perhaps the narrator feels related to Sedgwick's role as a muse. In her beauty, Sedgwick's own art is lost, such as her "entire winter" spent "sculpting a single horse" (Anolik). In her hopeful comparison to Sedgwick, the narrator desires separation from the norm, while appearing to understand the inherent solitary confinement of beauty to an outside perspective, regardless of artistry and uniqueness.

The narrator's beauty is not only discussed in her likeness to others but also in the isolating aspects of her self-contained beauty outside of the realm of celebrity comparison. In many ways, her aesthetics place her above those in the social circles around her, yet in doing this, she is effectively removed from said social circles. The narrator recalls her beauty even in adolescence: "At the private all-girls high school I went to, I'd had a flock of Reva-like adorers. I was emulated and gossiped about. I was blond and thin and pretty—that's what people noticed" (Moshfegh 65). Moshfegh's use of the word "flock" calls forth feelings related to definitions of a

flock as a “number of animals of one kind, feeding or traveling in company,” (OED 2.a.). Separating the narrator from the “flock” because of her beauty reads as equivalent to regarding the narrator as the herder of said flock; she is not a part of the flock, but rather an object of their obsession and following. Either functioning as the herder or as a member entirely separate from the flock itself, the narrator exists outside the collective as a direct result of her beauty. If the separation from the flock itself was not isolating enough, the narrator also makes a brief mention of the emulation and gossip related to her beauty. Though both words demonstrate envy of her looks, they also stand to represent a negative connotation associated with her outward appearance. To emulate is described by the OED as “to strive to equal or rival,” with *rival* being the most damning aspect of this interpretation (OED 1.). Similarly, gossip—a word with an already highly feminine connotation—is considered “idle” talk, often about the affairs of others without substantiated evidence (OED 3.a.). In being “gossiped about,” there is a distinct sense of exclusion regarding the narrator’s relationship with her peers. At one point, Moshfegh’s narrator approaches this notion with brevity, noting that “everyone I knew at school hated me because I was so pretty,” as if this were an absolute fact rather than an interpretation of one’s own belief (Moshfegh 148). The narrator, whose looks have allowed her to rise to the rank of an object of obsession, is hated and thus excluded for the very thing that breeds obsession.

In a similar sense to its creation of loneliness and exclusion, the narrator’s beauty also serves to create internal isolation. Her beauty serves as a dependable constant throughout the novel, with the narrator at one point confessing that it “did comfort me to see that I was still pretty, still blond and tall and thin. I still had good posture. One might have even confused me for a celebrity in slovenly incognito” (Moshfegh 93). Yet, it is also her beauty where she sometimes seems to feel most fabricated. Her desirability, marked by the attraction she has

garnered from older men, her on-again-off-again boyfriend Trevor, the “young Egyptians” working at the bodega she frequents, and Reva, is a point of contention and misconception. Near the outset of the novel, she describes this in a deceptively succinct manner:

“Since adolescence, I’d vacillated between wanting to look like the spoiled WASP that I was and the bum that I felt I was and should have been if I’d had any courage...But I looked like an off-duty model. It was easy to let things come easy and go nowhere. Trevor was right about my Achilles’ heel. Being pretty only kept me trapped in a world that valued looks above all else.” (Moshefeqh 35)

Her constant wavering between beauty against derelict and vagrancy seems to represent the fallibility of physical appearance. She remains “trapped in a world that valued looks above all else,” while simultaneously looking like an “off-duty model,” (Moshefeqh 35). Her beauty *should* be beneficial to her, allowing her acceptance into a world that values her aesthetic merit, but instead, she is defined by her disconnect from herself and the merit allotted by her beauty, as well as her longing for an external representation of her internal self. In both the “spoiled WASP” and the “bum,” Moshfeqh makes a point to say that the narrator was both things, but one of these traits (WASP) is external—signified by her acceptance of “the spoiled WASP that I was,”—and the other (“bum”) is a distinctly internal interpretation of self (Moshfeqh 35). In saying that the “bum” is what the narrator “felt [she] was,” Moshfeqh creates a disconnect between the beautiful physical self and the unattractive subconscious self. It is only through her external self, however, that the narrator feels trapped and isolated from others, likening her beauty to an “Achilles’ heel,” and thus likening beauty to a major weakness. To look like the “bum” that she felt she was, the narrator would require courage she seemed not to contain, further associating her external beauty with weakness, isolation, and entrapment.

Moshfegh creates a character that is repetitive in her reflection of self-image, though this reflection is so often met with external positivity. That is to say, the narrator's looks are approved by others around her, making her worthy even in her moments of comparable uncouthness when juxtaposed against a "normal" looking person. When she "shuffled through the lobby" of her Upper East Side apartment in pajamas and slippers, she noted that she felt she was "committing a crime," (Moshfegh 27). Yet, even in her deep isolation and amid a binge of "downers to drown out [her] thoughts and judgments," the narrator remains worthy in her beauty (Moshfegh 17). "I didn't care...I was tall and thin and blond and pretty and young. Even at my worst I still looked good," she says, regarding her previous confession of near criminality in her lack of reputable presentation. Though she may now be dressing and presenting as the "bum [she] felt [she] was," her beauty remains an entrapping and separating factor that prevents her from the entrance to either perception or instead leaves her within the state of continuous "vacillating" (Moshfegh 35).

Isolation Related to the Narrator's Wealth and Privilege

Coupled with the segregation as the result of her exceptional beauty, the narrator's wealth and attitude towards capitalistic consumption also place her in isolation from both the expectations of the Western world, and on a more microscopic level, from Reva. In a sense, Reva often stands to reflect the opinions and struggles of the world outside of the narrator's privilege, allowing the loneliness experienced by the author, and the continuous overwhelming desire for this loneliness in the first place, to serve as a depiction of the influence of consumption and capitalism between classes. The narrator's relationship and subsequent comparison with her best

friend, Reva, as well as her short-lived employment at a New York art gallery, all work to demonstrate Moshfegh's creation of a character isolated by her class. Much like her beauty, her class position is one of privilege, and yet there is a prevailing isolation that garners persistent mental illness and psychological issues. Her wealth—while possibly a more legitimate means of separating her from others than her looks—is also given less attention by the narrator than her looks.

Much of the juxtaposition of the narrator's wealth against others becomes apparent in her relationship with Reva. The narrator notes that Reva "worshiped me, but she also hated me. She saw my struggle with misery as a cruel parody of her own misfortunes. I had chosen my solitude and purposelessness, and Reva had, despite her hard work, simply failed to get what she wanted—no husband, no children, no fabulous career," (Moshfegh 13). From the outset of *MYR&R*, the narrator's isolation is apparent—but interestingly, so is Reva's. As noted by the narrator, Reva had "no husband, no children, no fabulous career," indicating a level of loneliness in Reva's life, as well. The thing that separates them, however, is the privilege of choice in the narrator's life. Her solitude and isolation from society are self-imposed, acting almost as a stance against labor in a way that Reva cannot afford to do, literally and figuratively. The juxtaposition between Reva and the narrator is mellowed by a perceived difference in beauty, but its core comes from a difference in class:

"Reva's envy was very self-righteous. Compared to me, she was "underprivileged." And according to her terms, she was right: I looked like a model, had money I hadn't earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history, so I was "cultured." Reva, on the other hand, came from Long Island, was an 8 out of 10 but called herself "a New York three," and had majored in economics." (Moshfegh 13).

Within the list of perceived transgressions the narrator has committed against Reva, only one is related to beauty outright. The narrator's wealth is tangibly obvious in the "money [she] hadn't earned," but persistent even in the "real designer clothing," and her cultural capital which comes from majoring in the less practical art history. The narrator's "real designer clothes" directly juxtapose Reva's "matching fake Coach rings," she once bought for herself and the narrator. In reflection on Reva's actions regarding the fake designer rings, the narrator notes that "ironically, her desire to be classy had always been the *déclassé* thorn in her side...Nothing hurt Reva more than effortless beauty, like mine," (Moshfegh 9). Once again, Moshfegh's apparent comparison of beauty serves as an actual commentary on class—Reva's "*déclassé* thorn in her side" indicates a lowliness that can never obtain the *laissez-faire* beauty of someone of wealth and class such as the narrator. When the narrator seems to have genuine interest in Reva's perceptions of the difference between them, asking Reva if she believes "her jealousy had anything to do with her being Jewish, if she thought things came easier to me because I was a WASP," Moshfegh is quick to redirect us to the isolation of beauty instead, with Reva replying that it's not because she's Jewish, but instead it's because she's "fat." In a moment of genuine friendship, the narrator juxtaposes this: "She really wasn't. She was very pretty, in fact," and suddenly the isolating differences between the narrator and Reva can no longer be solely beauty (Moshfegh 11). Thus, the isolation of the narrator's beauty is only the cherry on top of her long list of privileges.

In the same way that she is aware of her beauty, the narrator is distinctly aware of her privilege, despite paying less attention to it. When she submitted herself to the performance art with Xi Ping, the fictional artist who previously worked at the art studio where she was employed, he suggested burning her passport or cutting up her driver's license. The narrator,

however, knows she needs her identity to “help me access my bank accounts, to go places,” telling Xi Ping concisely: “I was born into privilege...I am not going to squander that. I’m not a moron,” (Moshfegh 265). Here, Moshfegh refuses to allow her character the sympathy that may come from having everything and then losing it—instead, the unnamed narrator is allowed to keep her privilege concerning wealth, but with a seemingly distinct knowledge that it will not—and has not—made her any less isolated. Her opportunity to shed this isolating point of difference is shrugged off by the narrator in four simple words: “I’m not a moron,” (Moshfegh 265). Here, Moshfegh indicates the narrator’s awareness of her privilege as something that divides her from others, yet not something she is willing to give up.

Regarding working, the narrator does little to ascend any corporate ladder, unlike Reva who receives a promotion that has her transferred to the Twin Towers just months before the 9/11 attacks. Instead, the narrator “easily [lands] the job as a gallery girl” at “Ducat, one of dozen “fine art” galleries on West Twenty-first street.” Unlike Reva’s promotion in a job defined as “no fabulous career,” the narrator approaches her work with “no big plan to become a curator, no great scheme to work my way up a latter...I thought that if I did normal things—held down a job, for example—I could starve off the part of me that hated everything,” (Moshfegh 35, 36). Her comparison to holding down a job as inherently “normal” indicates her difference from other members of capitalist society. The narrator’s passivity in succeeding within this system of classes is done only with the hope of “starving off the part of me that hated everything,” making her relationship to work interesting in its inherent sense of survival outside of the typical idea of capitalism. Unlike characters such as Reva who must work to survive under capitalism, Moshfegh’s narrator is privileged in that she has no desire to work, yet does so for the semblance of normalcy, in hopes that she will gain something other than monetary value from it. When her

hibernation overrides her ability to work, there is no need for concern. She knows that without her inheritance she would have “been forced to find a job that paid more money,” but her need for more money was trivial.

Instead of using her wealth and class to further the loneliness felt by the narrator—in turn, furthering her disconnect with Reva and others—Moshfegh uses the privilege as a way for the narrator to again seek isolation and solitude herself. Through her inheritance and privilege, the narrator chooses her “solitude and purposelessness,” unlike Reva, whose purposelessness comes simply from her inability to get what she wants and desires, presumably because of her lack of privilege in comparison to the narrator. The difference in the privilege of being beautiful is a central theme that separates the narrator from Reva, her only friend, but underlying all the difference that her beauty creates is also the narrator’s exemption from day-to-day struggles through her wealth and class standing.

Chapter 3

Close Reading Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

Isolation Related to Marianne's Physical Appearance

Similar and different from Moshfegh's exploration of loneliness due to the social value in personal aesthetics, Rooney explores Marianne's relationship to beauty as a key factor in her isolation as well. Different from Moshfegh's unnamed character, however, is Marianne's isolation from her peers due to her perceived ugliness or abnormalities regarding the norm of beauty. Early in the novel, during their younger, teenage years, Marianne's relationship with Connell is kept secret because of the perceived degradation she could cause him, as she is seen in school as "an object of disgust," (Rooney 3). In a way, Marianne's exclusion because of perceived ugliness and "disgust" makes more sense than the unnamed narrator's isolation through beauty. When considering historical depictions of ugly or beautiful women, literary tropes have long oscillated between ugly women who disguise beauty within, almost as a reward, and a "beautiful woman who hides inner corruption and ugliness," (Wright 28). Though on a surface level, Moshfegh and Rooney may appear to embody this antiquated literary trope of female aesthetics, a close reading of both authors demonstrates that neither beauty nor ugliness can keep characters from their isolation. Though Marianne is not so ugly as to be offensive—in fact, she is found to be beautiful, or close to beautiful, by different people many times throughout the novel—her insecurity coupled with nonconformity in aesthetics works to make her perceived ugliness a vehicle of self and social isolation.

In a similarly obsessive way to that of the unnamed narrator in *MYR&R*, Marianne spends much time evaluating her looks:

“She sits at her dressing table looking at her face in the mirror. Her face lacks definition around the cheeks and jaw. It’s a face like a piece of technology, and her eyes are cursors blinking. Or its reminiscent of the moon reflected in something, wobbly and oblique. It expresses everything all at once, which expresses nothing. To wear makeup for this occasion would be, she concludes, embarrassing.” (Rooney 9).

Unlike the unnamed narrator, however, is that of Marianne’s pervasive self-consciousness. In saying that her face is “like a piece of technology,” she implies inhumanity, separating her from her peers who do not seem to possess the same coldness. Literature has long compared the moon and femininity, with analysis from the likes of Carl Jung discussing the way women’s consciousness “has a lunar rather than a solar character. Its light is the ‘mild’ light of the moon, which merges things together rather than separates them” (Sadof 94). While elemental aspects of this comparison are rooted in gendered archetypes, the inherent roots of femininity in the moon remain even within a modern context. When considering this, Marianne’s reflection now as the moon—instead of a piece of technology—is “reflected...wobbly and oblique,” further implying her perception of dissimilarity between herself and others. She is feminine, perhaps, in the way the moon may be, but there is an unsteadiness in this representation of femininity. Marianne’s isolation and awareness of her differences from that of her peers seems so severe that Rooney makes even the most fundamental elements of teenage girlhood a source of embarrassment and shame to Marianne; to put on makeup would, in some apparent sense, reduce Marianne to a state even further removed from that of her peers. The scene of Marianne in the mirror precedes a fundraising event taking place in a club—an event where even the men utilize beauty products: “There’s a heavy, stirring smell of aftershave in the air,” (Rooney 39).

Despite this, Marianne cannot bring herself to engage in the act of beautification, signaling her introspective disconnect from perceived femininity.

Marianne is used to the routine embarrassment at the behest of her peers, much of which is related to her lack of beauty concerning a perceived lack of femininity. In one scene, Marianne tells Connell that his friend “called me flat-chested today in front of everyone... You were in the bathroom or somewhere. He said I looked like an ironing board” (Rooney 38). Unlike the narrator in *MYR&R*, whose thinness is oft equated with her worthiness, Marianne’s thinness acts as a point of contention. When she is dressed up for the fundraiser, the same boy who called her flat-chested remarks on her looks: “Look at you, Marianne, says Eric.” When Marianne struggles to “tell immediately whether he’s being sincere or mocking,” Eric doubles down on his compliment: “I’m serious, Eric says. Great dress, very sexy,” (Rooney 39). This equating of Marianne and sexiness causes another girl named Rachel in the scene to laugh, causing Marianne a “certain pressure in her head that she wants to relieve by screaming or crying,” (Rooney 39). The words and actions of her peers allow Marianne femininity and aesthetics just as quickly as they take them away; Marianne is isolated even in the perceived acceptance of her peers, due to people like Eric and Rachel, who can simultaneously build Marianne’s perception of self while similarly taking it away through just a few words or actions regarding *only* her physical appearance. Suddenly, Marianne is alone again, despite fleeting moments of fitting in. Only when Marianne is exposed to the flaws of other women does she see likeness; She dances with another girl from her grade named Karen, of whom Marianne smells the “wine spritzer on Karen’s breath, she can see her fillings. She likes her so much at that moment,” (Rooney 40).

Marianne’s isolation at the hands of her nonconformity with beauty standards is not just perceived by herself and her distant peers, but perhaps most importantly by Connell as well.

Functioning as the only person seen to have any lasting closeness to Marianne, Connell's assessments of her are often wrought with similarly isolating thoughts. At one point, he considers himself "perverse" due to his "secret desires" with Marianne (Rooney 24). He considers his ostracization as implicitly balanced with hers; if his peers were to find out about their relationship with one another, he believes he would face judgment. During a moment of physical intimacy with her, Connell thinks to himself: "But why Marianne? It wasn't like she was so attractive. Some people thought she was the ugliest girl in school. What kind of person would ever want to do this with her?" (Rooney 25). Yet, Connell's attraction to her is clear, and only through his analysis of her is Marianne able to find a semblance of connection: "He tells her that she's beautiful. She has never heard that before, though she has sometimes privately suspected it of herself, but it feels different to hear it from another person" (Rooney 45). These moments of Connell's approval are deeply moving to her, but they do not appear to do anything to cure her of her loneliness. When Connell tells her that he loves her, Marianne believes this to be "a new life, of which this is the very first moment" (Rooney 46). Yet the first inclination of Connell's shame of her—his asking another girl from school to dance—is a shame which she has already been previously familiar with:

"Eventually [Marianne] laughed, because she wasn't totally without spirit, and it was obviously kind of funny, just how savagely he had humiliated her, and his inability to apologize or even admit he had done it. She went home then and straight to bed, where she slept for thirteen hours without waking. The next morning she quit school" (Rooney 64).

In protecting herself from the loneliness that comes with her personal and socially perceived undesirability, Marianne isolates herself first. While reflecting on her relationship with Connell, Marianne pushes herself deeper into a sense of loneliness and unlovability, noting her belief that Connell had "never tried to delude her into thinking she was socially acceptable; she'd

deluded herself” (Rooney 66). In the aftermath of her isolation by Connell, she considers her future, deciding that in “just a few weeks’ time Marianne will live with different people, and her life will be different. But she will not be different. She’ll be the same person, trapped inside her own body. There’s nowhere she can go that would free her from this” (Rooney 67). Marianne’s physicality—her feeling of being “trapped inside her own body”—is an effect that is inescapable despite external changes. When Connell first told Marianne he loved her before casting her into deeper isolation, one can recall Marianne’s exclamation of a “new life,” which is now juxtaposed harshly against her perception of a life that will be different, but a self that will not be. Though this differs from the entrapment of beauty that the narrator of *MYR&R* faces, Marianne’s entrapment in the system of social expectations of beauty is equally as isolating.

Isolation Related to Marianne’s Wealth and Privilege

More like the narrator of *MYR&R*, however, is Marianne’s class standing. Rooney’s choice to separate Connell and Marianne so vastly by class is only further isolating via the period of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland that she chooses to conduct this class comparison within. Marianne’s wealth is so dramatic in comparison to Connell’s that their reason for meeting outside of class happens because Connell’s mother works as the house cleaner for Marianne’s family. Through Marianne’s class difference, she does not self-isolate as much as the narrator in *MYR&R*, though she does experience privilege that occasionally puts her out of touch with Connell and others. Rooney writes Marianne in such a way that much of the isolation comes from external views of her family and their wealth, yet this isolation remains an important wedge between Marianne and her peers.

While still in high school and thus still in a secret relationship with Marianne, Connell is asked whether he has ever gone to Marianne's house, or "into the mansion," as his friend Rob puts it, invoking a sense of unwelcomeness (Rooney 24). His friends continue to ask him about his experiences seeing Marianne "in her natural habitat," and they wonder if Marianne "thinks of [Connell] as her butler," (Rooney 24). Though the scene is meant to be portrayed with lightness and curiosity from Connell's friends, Connell's reaction when they ask if she has a "little bell she would ring to get his attention," is to completely reevaluate his relationship with her (Rooney 24). He makes a vow to himself that "it was over, he'd just had sex with her once to see what it was like," (Rooney 24). Marianne, who is not present and thus unable to defend herself against libel, is isolated by her difference in class to an extent that forces Connell to attempt to eradicate his feelings for her all together.

When the two characters have left their teenage years in Sligo behind and both move to Dublin to attend Trinity College, Marianne's wealth becomes the standard. Though Rooney writes Connell as similarly isolated, it is interesting that she continues to use Marianne's privilege and upper-class tendencies to isolate her, despite being in an environment where her wealth is now the norm. When Connell gets a new girlfriend, she is put off by Marianne's "vague nods" at her compliments, and "in-depth opinion about the Magdalene Laundry report or the Denis O'Brien case," which Connell notes his genuine interest in, but similarly understands how her "fondness for expressing them at length, to the exclusion of lighter conversation, was not universally charming" (Rooney 173). I don't believe that Rooney makes Marianne's class difference explicitly about wealth, here, but instead focuses on the learned aspects of Marianne's privilege. In studying politics, Marianne seeks education much like the culture gained by the narrator's study of art history in *MYR&R*. Unlike Connell who is constantly worried about not

finding a job with his English degree, the nature of Marianne and her future role in the job force is not brought up. Her higher education is simply the next step in the expectations of her life, not a means to a job, isolating her from Connell further—the one true relationship in her life.

This is similarly evident when Connell and Marianne both win scholarships from Trinity which subsidize tuition and provide free housing and free meals. When Marianne's friend Peggy does not receive a scholarship, Marianne notes her worry. Connell, however, internally addresses the fact that "Peggy didn't need subsidized tuition or free on-campus accommodation because she lived at home in Blackwell and her parents were both doctors, but Marianne was intent on seeing the scholarship as a matter of personal feeling rather than economic fact" (Rooney 179). Whereas Connell needed the scholarship to focus on his schoolwork rather than his multiple part-time jobs to pay for schooling, Marianne's relationship to the scholarship is one of personal success outside of the capitalistic aspects. In the conversation that follows Connell's internal thoughts, Marianne tells him she "doesn't think about it much," regarding the fact that they are from different backgrounds in terms of class. Though she recognizes her fault—telling him "Sorry, that's an ignorant thing to say. Maybe I should think about it more"—the implication that their class difference is not on her mind further alienates her from Connell, who is constantly thinking about his positionality in terms of class.

It is an interesting choice for both Rooney and Moshfegh to have their isolated female characters in positions of privilege. Though both the unnamed narrator of *MYR&R* and Marianne are distinctly aware of their privilege and class disparity compared most often to their closest relationship, both authors present the characters as sympathetic in their isolation. The narrator's often satirical discussion of consumerism and her disinclination towards work differs vastly from Marianne's effort towards education and her more solemn approach to class differences, and

perhaps is most accurately a representation of the difference of authorial background rather than a difference in theme. Rooney and Moshfegh criticize the consumerism of modern society through these privileged characters, and their construction of class and isolation as inherently connected weaves the two works into the broader category of Sad Girl Literature, demonstrating despair, passivity, and pervasive psychological introspection even in the face of privilege.

Chapter 4

The Limits of Critique: Sad Girl Literature as Dissociative Feminism

The Dissociative Feminist

A common criticism of Sad Girl Literature is the perceived wave of “dissociative feminism”—a term coined by Emmeline Clein in a 2019 article—that these works appear to promote. In essence, dissociative feminism is said to focus on waifish, often white and/or otherwise privileged women who deal with the trauma of their lives and modern issues by dissociating in passive anguish, often accompanied by deep knowledge and awareness of the patriarchal standards by which they remain confined. This discourse, which maintains criticisms that are rooted in legitimate issues, always seems to me like it fails to acknowledge the parts of it that may be untrue or invalid. This is to say—as Maia Wyman, a video essayist who goes by the name of Broey Deschanel online, puts it—dissociative feminism is a discourse that “refuses to be a discourse,” by refusing to debate itself and instead becoming saturated with arguments that align with one another without much deviation (Deschanel). In Clein’s discussion of dissociative feminism, she writes, “These women are both vindicating and distressing: If Sally Rooney’s skinny, precocious Irish beauties are this upset, then certainly I have every right to give up on the world.” Clein continues her argument by asserting that “giving up on progress,” which she perceives these female characters to be doing is “perhaps the epitome of white feminism and promotes a nihilism that is somewhere between unproductive and genuinely dangerous,” (Clein).

Arguments like Clein’s are, as stated previously, shrouded in important truth. Teen suicide rates in females have doubled between 2007 and 2015 and have risen 62% between all

genders from 2007 through 2021 (CDC). According to a *Time* article, this rate for females is at a 40-year high (Time). Along with this, many reports of increased rates of eating disorders among females in the past years have occurred, with some attributing a timeline of increase to the COVID-19 pandemic. One report noted that “diagnostic incidence was 15.3% higher in 2020” for eating disorders, and this increase occurred “solely in females” (Taquet et. al). The real-life statistics do not escape Sad Girl Literature, with Moshfegh’s continued insistence that her unnamed narrator is “blond and thin and pretty” whilst in the throes of a pill addiction and minimal eating (Moshfegh 65). Rooney, too, partakes in a culture that associates thinness with dissociation and mental illness, noting Marianne’s habitual eating disorder as she studies abroad in Sweden, during which she is at perhaps her most isolated: “In Lund, she’s never really hungry, and though she fills a plastic Evian bottle with water every morning, she empties most of it back into the sink at night,” (Rooney 197). Marianne, whom Rooney has already established as thin to the point of lacking femininity, encounters dissociation and disordered eating together.

In these moments of somewhat glamorized mental health crises, I can understand the argument that critiques of dissociative feminism are making, but I still believe many of the arguments being made in these criticisms fail to acknowledge the makings of complex, flawed female characters. In a sense, many criticisms of dissociative feminism appear to be a critique of the “non-perfect feminist” in media, and yet, how does one function as a truly perfect feminist? In another essay discussing these kinds of “millennial women,” Rebecca Liu writes: “We are now supposedly in the era of the ‘unlikeable woman,’ which means that we celebrate that women too can be dirty, repulsive, mean, cruel, and flawed” (Liu). Liu discusses her appreciation—to an extent—of this kind of woman, and while I agree that there is much celebration of the unlikeable woman as a multi-dimensional character, I find Liu’s focus to rely too much on the external

perceptions of the women of these stories. She makes wonderful points regarding the privilege, and with that, often the whiteness of the women in these stories, noting that the women of these stories, who are “ostensibly furnished with all the social trappings to take over the world,” instead turn their gaze “inward to hate themselves, their bodies, their thighs, the tone of their speech, the other women in their lives, their fathers. Why are the very women who, in theory, hold the *most* social power so interested in divesting themselves of it?” (Liu).

The issue I take with these arguments is that the interior nature of the women is pitted against their exterior, much in the way antiquated literature may make externally beautiful women internally evil, and vice versa. Placing expectations on female behavior based on external factors seems to go against many modern perceptions of mental illness, namely the belief that it can happen to anyone. As Deschanel puts it in her essay, “These female characters have external social trappings that make them externally privileged, but it’s not like their internal self-loathing just exists in a vacuum...none of these essays acknowledge that Marianne from *Normal People* is the way she is because she carries unresolved psychological damage from the abuse she suffered from her late father...” (Deschanel). Concerning Moshfegh’s unnamed narrator, her consistent obsession with her own beauty satirizes the way her character is an “avatar of the beauty standard to signify that she can check out of the world sleep through life and still get by due to the pure inertia that beauty runs on in this capitalistic world where that is women's greatest and only currency” while simultaneously being in such proximity to trauma (Deschanel). Looking at the consistent isolation of the women of Sad Girl Lit, the women may have the external privilege of social power through beauty and literal wealth, but through their self-alienation and loneliness, they hold little power in their interpersonal lives. The critics of Sad Girl Literature often seem to abandon these contextual details of the female characters to move

forward with the critique that identifies these books as dissociative feminist, or sometimes even passively anti-feminist. The arguments of dissociative feminism are valuable, and their rhetoric is often legitimate, but diagnosing this archetypal millennial leading female character as apathetic in the face of the patriarchy is easy enough when the reader looks to the external actions—or lack thereof—of the characters. Marianne’s and the unnamed narrator’s waifish appearances do little to help encourage young readers to dig deeper into the character’s psychology, and yet I believe this to be a shortcoming of the reader, not the author. All the elements of creating a compelling close reading on the isolation and terror of modern society are present in both Rooney’s and Moshfegh’s novels, and yet readers seem insistent on focusing on the surface.

Can Millennial’s Close Read?

In an article about Rooney’s *Normal People* for the New York Review, author Lorrie Moore chastises millennials largely on the basis that they are “boundary cautious...They are not good liars. They seem like nice people. But not normal. They seem like nice people who are privately doing terrible things to themselves” (Moore). Though it sounds like she is giving a wonderfully succinct character evaluation of Rooney’s and Moshfegh’s main protagonists, she is discussing millennials in the real world, *not* fictional characters. In many ways, Moore’s evaluation of the non-fiction millennial is a mirror of the characters authors like Rooney and Moshfegh have created; Moore believes millennials will:

“Deride yet exploits all privilege...they find envy is not a form of hate but a legitimate aspect of success culture... thus secret self-harm such as cutting (unheard of among boomer youth) has rushed in to fill the vacuum. Para-suicidality has sidled up...what are their consolations? All

eating is problematic. Their music, unbeknownst to them, is feeble, unoriginal, and repurposed” (Moore).

Moore’s contention with the millennial generation—albeit sometimes frustrating and distinctly evident of the generational divide—is accurate when we consider the waifish millennial characters reflected in the Sad Girl Literature. Yet, unlike the think-pieces that boast terms like “dissociative feminist” to define flawed female protagonists, Moore’s work focuses on a critique of the readers of these millennial works, a focus which I find valuable, and yet largely contested. To say that the younger generations are not great readers may be too general and perhaps too impudent, yet there is an undeniable acknowledgment that young people are not reading as much as previous generations. A recent article in *The Atlantic* by Katherine Marsh looked to understand younger generations’ relationship to reading, noting that while “the ubiquity and allure of screens surely play a large part in this... this isn’t the whole story... one of the most compelling—and depressing—is rooted in how our education system teaches kids to relate to books” (Marsh). In discussions with several educators, Marsh deduced that the advent of “accountability laws and policies, starting with No Child Left Behind in 2001, and accompanying high-stakes assessments based on standards...has put enormous pressure on instructors to teach to these tests at the expense of best practices,” (Marsh). Thus, from a young age, people are taught to analyze only certain sections of books to develop a pseudo-close reading of the work which functions largely as an academic skill rather than a personal literacy. In doing this, the book becomes an assessment, a way to measure if students “have mastered all the standards that await them in evaluation,” rather than a skill to use when forming personal connections or deeper understandings of the novels (Marsh).

Similarly, Moore's seeming disdain for the millennial generation seems to relate to this superficial means of evaluation. As she puts it in her article, "Millennials scan behavior and texts for authorial missteps and outdated cultural memes; reading immersively on the author's terms might be overpowering and fascistic" (Moore). Moore's indication that millennial readers refuse to read immersively in favor of scanning for "authorial missteps" is a key aspect of what makes the dissociative feminist discourse so uninteresting to me. With all this criticism placed on the millennial novel and the millennials themselves, how do younger people themselves feel about these books? The think-pieces on dissociative feminism appear to be their answer: a reading of literature that still values women who perform as they are expected to. This expectation of female performance within modern Sad Girl Lit recalls the structure of previous eras of literature: expectations of the gothic novel presented in *Jane Eyre*, the reward of female virtue in Samuel Richardson's aptly subtitled *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, and the marriage plots of Jane Austen's beloved novels. Without these same identifiable structures, it can seem that modern literature lacks a theme and that there is little to be learned or examined. When reading Rooney's *Normal People* or Moshfegh's *MYR&R* with this surface-level expression of dissociative feminism in mind, I come back to Deschanel's argument in her video essay, namely that "these essays [on dissociative feminism] completely flatten and dull the intricacies, complexities, and purposes of their work" (Deschanel).

Unlike arguments of dissociative feminism which seek to dismantle the creation of the "unlikeable woman" into something more sinister, Deschanel acknowledges that "what ties these works together is that through their institutional advantages, these artists have been able to pioneer a more complex version of womanhood in the public eye" (Deschanel). The media of Sad Girl Lit is interiorly psychological, with Deschanel discussing how female protagonists of

the emerging genre “start off numb and distant...and then embark on a path out,” as seen in the narrator of Moshfegh’s *MYR&R*’s transformative isolation and Marianne’s growing maturity and confidence through the novel. Deschanel’s ultimate response to the think-pieces on dissociative feminism encapsulates the lack of close reading done by those who consume Sad Girl media:

“This stuff isn’t included as decoration; it’s meant to inform a greater message in the storytelling. So why are these essayists pretending it isn’t there...we can’t fathom that a hot girl might be sad because she had a difficult upbringing or because she lives in an ever-alienating world?”

(Deschanel). On the surface, the millennial female protagonist often does feel like a mirror image of the previously referenced online “girlbloggers” or self-proclaimed “femcels,” allowing the slough of online girls to relate these books to broader social aspects of the “Sad Girl.” The girls who post lyrics to Lana Del Rey songs (the millennial singer famous for distinctly dissociative lyrics like “I f----- up, I know that, but Jesus / Can’t a girl just do the best she can?” and “Don’t ask if I’m happy / You know that I’m not / But at best I can say I’m not sad,”) and old photos of Sofia Coppola are often also reading about (and relating to) Moshfegh’s prose full of internalized psychosis and Rooney’s ill-communicating, waifish Marianne (Del Rey).

Thus, it should come as no surprise that the trend of Sad Girl Literature has been embraced by younger generations who relate to the messiness of modern femininity. There is an equally insurmountable pressure, it would seem, for real women to embody the “perfect feminist,” just as much as there is for the fictional protagonists of the likes of Rooney and Moshfegh. The danger of dissociative feminism is very real, and widely visible in online communities, but denouncing the flawed protagonists of these modern literatures as so afflicted to be averse to a change in the patriarchal structure that afflicts them in the first place indicates a lack of critical reading. The narrator of *MYR&R* is dissociative in the face of day-to-day trials,

but her very cause of dissociation is one associated with the seemingly widely experienced traumas of the modern woman. In denying fictional characters nuance in their unlikability, we similarly deny real women the same. As a result, real-life, imperfect women relate to the socially uncouth depiction of femininity and feminism in the emerging genre, propelling Sad Girl Lit forward and inspiring more millennial writers to create “unlikable” women. Much like how Deschanel critiques dissociative feminism for implying that the self-loathing of these protagonists “[exists] in a vacuum,” Del Rey’s lyrics similarly do not exist in a vacuum for the modern, young woman. With more than 56 million listeners on Spotify and 14.6 million followers on Instagram, artists like Del Rey stand as evidence of the young woman’s tendency towards melancholia, dissociation, and many of the other characteristics that make up the protagonists in the novels of Rooney and her contemporaries. To denounce Sad Girl Lit based on dissociation fails to acknowledge or examine the much more deep-rooted issues that cause this dissociation—namely that of patriarchal structures and society in which these novels and song lyrics so beloved by the young women are set.

The discussions of dissociative feminism—specifically in Liu’s essay—*do* sometimes note that the larger issue with this concept is not always the works that employ it, but rather the way modern audiences perceive this form of feminism. Liu notes that the women of these works are “not so much avatars for the emancipatory possibilities of womanhood as they are signs of a colossal social failure to provide substantive avenues of flourishing, care, and communal generosity,” a perspective which certainly holds inherent value when we consider the arising issues present in modern females’—especially adolescent—lives (Liu). Looking at real-world examples of female-based issues, online communities such as pro-eating-disorder communities magnify the dangers of romanticizing female mental illness and disassociation. Despite this,

simplifying the real and traumatic issues of Marianne and the unnamed to that of “dissociative feminism” effectively strips the works of internal character context and places them into a “sub-category of feminism to then be picked apart for its failure to be adequately feminist,” (Deschanel).

I do agree that female mental illness is often glamorized and even more often intellectualized, making the female who experiences mental illness somehow more learned or worldly than those who do not necessarily experience the same malaise or psychological turmoil. However, Moshfegh herself notes that she does not understand her “sad girl” fans, noting that she hopes the people reading her novels know “this is a satire, this is not real. And we live in an age where everything is so distorted that I don’t want anyone overdosing on Ambien because they read my book” (Clark). Similarly, when Rooney considers her role in displaying appropriate modern characters, she says: “My books may well fail as artistic endeavors, but I don’t want them to fail for failing to speak for a generation for which I never intended to speak in the first place,” leaving us to wonder why we have assigned female artists like Moshfegh and Rooney to act as representatives in creating “adequately feminist,” characters for the newer generations in the first place (Armitstead).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The emergence of the modern Sad Girl Lit has a literary basis that connects historical, canonical works of literature alongside modern authors and recent best-sellers. The theme of female isolation due to external factors such as beauty and class are distinct markers of the emerging genre, and the contention of characters deemed privileged in these aspects is a key critique of modern works. Authors like Ottessa Moshfegh and Sally Rooney create prose that is sometimes quiet in its satire and critique of our modern issues, especially female-centric ones. Looking at criticisms of Moshfegh and Rooney's work as that of glamorized dissociative feminism, and thus dangerous rhetoric in the advancement of women in a patriarchal system, critics stand to erase the complexities and nuances of female apathy and self- or socially-inflicted isolation.

Looking back to the perceived differences in physical beauty in the narrator of Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the narrator notes her entrapment in these beauty standards, even though she should be the one benefitting from her own conventional beauty. When Moshfegh writes "being pretty only kept me trapped in a world that valued looks above all else," it's difficult not to feel condemnation for the sense of minimizing privilege. The narrator's beauty already places her in a position that is above others, and Moshfegh uses these moments to satirize, to further push the bounds of unlikability in her character without delegitimizing the issues and trauma she truly faces. Her desire to hibernate, to sleep for a year, is a choice made with legitimate issues in mind: "This was how I knew the sleep was having an effect: I was growing less and less attached to life. If I kept going, I thought, I'd disappear completely, then

reappear in some new form. This was my hope. This was the dream” (Moshfegh 84). When the narrator’s hibernation is achieved, and when she awakens to a new world—one where one of the largest national tragedies is quick to strike upon her “waking up”—Moshfegh writes that pain is not the “only touchstone for growth...My sleep had worked. I was soft and calm and felt things. This was good. This was my life now” (Moshfegh 288).

Ultimately, Rooney and Moshfegh are creating female characters who are deeply flawed, clawing at normalcy, hope, and desire in a world that is increasingly focused on their abilities, physical appearance, and understanding of their own privilege. Their apathy regarding awareness of their entrapment in patriarchal standards is evident, and understanding and acknowledging criticisms of this malaise is important when considering these works. Yet, these female characters are enchanting, memorable, and flawed. Their imperfect feminism—if it can even be called “feminism,” at times—is an important aspect of their existence. Expecting women’s interiors to accurately represent their exteriors is nearly as entrapping as the patriarchal standards that are already nearly inescapable. The thread of Sad Girl Lit travels through canonical, historical works and into our modern, millennial authors. When our definition of feminism has changed so vastly through the times of these novels, how can we expect novelists to accept and commit to one narrative of femininity?

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