

Literary Fiction from the Perspective of Romance: *Normal People*

Francesca Pierini

Published online: February 2023

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) is a refined, touching, and quintessentially current coming-of-age narrative that recounts the romantic encounters of two young people, Marianne and Connell, who experience the extraordinary luck (and misfortune?) of finding one another before becoming adults.[1] The novel explores these encounters and the effect they have on the psyches and aspirations of the protagonists. Alongside this main plot is a persistent subtheme dealing with inequality among the social classes, and the effects such a disparity has on the lives of the younger generations.

The novel's exploration of both class and young love resists the often dichotomous readings of romance as an unpolitical genre, precisely because it uses popular form to present its politics. In *Rethinking the Romance Genre* (2013), Emily S. Davis analyses this type of critique. She notes how political postcolonial texts have been categorized as 'sell-outs' for their mixing of political concerns with generic and popular artistic forms. Davis particularly focuses on genres – the romance, the gothic, and the melodrama – that have long been associated with a domain more private than public. Against these dichotomous views of 'the private' and 'the public,' Davis contends that "the task of cultural analysis is not to pit the 'merely personal' against the 'profoundly structural,'" (225) but to attend to the ways intimacy, sexuality, and the personal sphere contribute to create the current existential episteme. *Normal People* weaves together 'the personal' and 'the structural' in an elegantly told portrayal of young love, and in so doing asks readers to attend to this "current existential episteme" as it plays out in the text.

The purpose of this note is to analyse this mixing of the structural and the personal. Specifically, by looking at how the narrative constructs love by incorporating elements borrowed from both the romance as well as the historical form of the bildungsroman. For this reason, the following note is divided into two parts. In the first part, *Normal People* will be briefly discussed in light of Pamela Regis' eight essential narrative elements of the

romance. The second part will discuss the novel's adherence to the narrative and discursive conventions of the bildungsroman.

Normal People, as both a romance novel and as a coming-of-age story, constructs a love relationship that centres on the development of both its protagonists. Effectively, *Normal People* operates as if there was a 'dual hero,' and therefore, rejects the traditional bildungsroman, with its egocentric protagonist whose main concern is the achievement of individual subjectivity. Rather, the novel endorses a logic of material and emotional co-dependence and reciprocal support for its young protagonists, which speaks as much to its political concerns around class as it does to its interest in romantic intimacy. It depicts Marianne and Connell's respective coming-of-age as a dynamic course, one contingent on their encounters and relationship with each other.

Marianne and Connell's first encounter takes place at Marianne's mansion, where Connell goes to pick up Lorraine, his mother, who works there as a housekeeper. Connell and Marianne are, therefore, from the very beginning, very much impacted by the social context in which they meet and become close to one another. The narrative immediately makes the 'macro' and the 'micro,' the 'structural' and the 'private,' proceed hand in hand, suggesting the importance of social status and environment to personal histories and sentimental experiences.

Aside from establishing their unequal social statuses, the initial sequence tells us that Connell and Marianne are bright students, that Connell is popular among teachers and peers, and that Marianne, on the contrary, has no friends.

At the beginning of their relationship, young Connell and Marianne seem to be oblivious to the 'macro' barriers that define the context in which they act, exclusively perceiving their lack of agency and their indecisions as purely personal obstacles. For Connell, the main barrier is the prospect of being judged by his friends for his attachment to 'odd' Marianne. Marianne, on the other hand, does not perceive herself as someone worthy of love because of an abusive familial environment we learn about little by little.

If the attraction between protagonists is a narrative element romance novels usually dose out over the course of the narrative, then *Normal People* plays with the reader's expectations by having Connell and Marianne engage in sexual relations almost immediately and without investing this event with any particular significance in regards to their relationship. The 'naturalness' of their bond is apparent throughout; it is an overriding force that will always pull them close. Initially, it is surprising and destabilizing. In time, it will establish itself as a familiar presence.

The declaration of love, often connected to the resolution of conflict, marks, in *Normal People* the beginning of a modulation of the conflict, in which Marianne and Connell will split and return to one another multiple times. Once Connell and Marianne are caught up within a fluctuation of high and lows, a point of ritual death occurs every time they split.

Over the course of an extended sequence at the end of the narrative, Marianne goes through a series of realizations concerning herself, her family, her boyfriends, and her friends. Crucially, she realises Connell's sincere and enduring feelings for her. Relying on these insights, Marianne finds the courage to run away from a wrong relationship, respecting the romance novel convention according to which "the heroine must escape her 'death'" (Regis 35) to re-unite with the hero.

Meanwhile, in a parallel sequence taking place over the course of a therapy session, Connell lets the reader 'see' his pain for the first time. The recent suicide of Rob, a friend from

school, triggers for Connell a series of unresolved issues, making him despair of ever feeling at ease in the world. During his excruciating admission of pain, Connell indicates to the therapist, as the only positive aspects in his life, his love for literature and his closeness to Marianne.

When Connell and Marianne see each other again at Rob's funeral, indeed they 'recognize' one another, immediately re-establishing that private space of communication that always encircles them, leaving everyone else out.

At this point, the narrative presents the reader with a 'better' society: Connell rescues Marianne from her abusive brother, they both fully understand the importance of one another's presence for their respective mental health and well-being, Marianne acknowledges she has been occasionally insensitive towards Connell's financial difficulties. They smooth over the rough edges of their familial relations (Connell) or accept that they will never be resolved (Marianne), they move their first steps into 'the real world' by finding employment (Marianne) and timidly begin to publish their work (Connell).

However, the modulation will continue. Once they understand how important they are and have been for one another, they can even afford to (momentarily?) separate and act like the adults they have become by letting one another have their chance at accomplishing their dreams.

In his seminal discussion of the canonical phase of the Bildungsroman, Franco Moretti analyses *Wilhelm Meister* (1795-6) alongside *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), focussing on the characteristics of personal growth of the protagonists and gradual adjustment to the world that both genres traditionally feature. Moretti argues that both genres attempt to harmonise the complementary spheres of "mobility" and "interiority" (Moretti 4), arguably a reworking of the dichotomous terms of the 'structural' and the 'private', while also directing the psychological development of its characters towards personal growth and social adjustment.

Marianne and Connell get increasingly adjusted to the world and society. Connell, with the help of Marianne, learns to navigate the passage from 'the province' to 'the city' as the acceptance of a new identity. He finds this sort of emancipation difficult, as his sense of estrangement is reinforced when he takes part in cultural events that instead of celebrating literature/writing as a personal but inclusive experience, appropriate it as a practice of social distinction.

Therefore, *Normal People* still responds to and elaborates upon some of the traditional tropes characterizing the Bildungsroman – the protagonist from the provinces, education as personal salvation, the worldly power of the city. Of course, the text revisits these tropes from a contemporary perspective, by showing how unstable and deceitful these institutions have become in the current era.

The historical form of the Bildungsroman set some specific ground rules, as it were, for future narrative of personal development and upbringing that contemporary authors are currently trying to subvert, question, or 'de-centre'. *Normal People* aims at destabilizing two such tropes particularly: the centrality and solitude of the individual against a background of 'secondary' characters and events, and the positive (or negative) accomplishment of existence as purposeful, teleological parable.

Normal People is committed to finding alternatives to the triadic schema of unity, division, then unity regained at a higher level upon which the Bildungsroman is traditionally based, as well as the perception of existence as an individual pursuit. In order to find ways of conceiving and narrating otherness that do not reduce it to a stepping-stone towards self-

realization, the novel places at its centre a love relationship, challenging the trope of the centrality, autonomy, and fundamental self-sufficiency of a fictional figure reaching maturity on his/her own.

Normal People makes an argument in favour of emotional co-dependence and the human necessity to love and be loved against claims for intellectual as well as emotional (and financial) self-sufficiency. Furthermore, by making Connell and Marianne's relationship continue 'beyond' the last page of the novel, it also signals the impossibility of a final existential accomplishment.

As a hybrid and multi-layered creation, *Normal People* uniquely encapsulates elements of the romance and the coming-of-age story. The novel blends two literary forms—making a case for the interconnectedness between self-knowledge and individual adjustment to society on the one hand, and the capacity to love another on the other—whose past and current affiliations should be further explored.

[1] For an extensive analysis of the novel, see my article "Sharing the Same Soil: Sally Rooney's *Normal People* and the Coming-of-Age Romance." *Prospero: A Journal of Foreign Literatures and Cultures* XXVI (2021): 141–166.

References

- Davis, Emily S. *Rethinking the Romance Genre. Global Intimacies in Contemporary Literary and Visual Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Moretti, Franco. 1987. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. Verso, 2000.
- Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.
- Rooney, Sally. *Normal People*. Faber & Faber, 2018.