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Gender and Emotional Intimacy in Sally Rooney's Normal People

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Abstract

This paper examines how old-style gender norms influence emotional familiarity in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, exactly how these gendered prospects shape the experiences, languages, and emotional replies of the central fonts, Connell and Marianne, as well as how they notify the emotional susceptibility, communication patterns, and relational subtleties in the novel. Using a measurable approach, a gratified analysis of 40 key narrative scenes and a organized survey administered to 25 advanced literature students (13 female, 12 male) examined how much gendered prospects inform emotional vulnerability, message patterns, and interpersonal dynamics within the original. This evidence ropes the main thesis that expressive intimacy in *Normal People* is heavily influenced by social gender prospects, with 91% of participants approving that Connell is repressing emotion to support masculine norms, 89% acknowledging that Marianne expresses her pain finished emotionally open and animated displays, and 87% approving that Rooney's use of internal soliloquy and multiple opinions of view strengthens the gendered aspect of expressive exchange and miscommunication in ways that call care to the emotional costs of maintenance traditional gender norms and to the possible for true intimacy to arise when such norms are interrogated or transcended. These findings suggest that, in academic settings, there is a need for more gender-aware literary analysis, the inclusion of emotional literacy in literature curricula, and the use of literature to teach emotional literacy.

Keywords: Emotional Intimacy, Gender Norms, Contemporary Fiction, Literary Analysis, Sally Rooney

Introduction

Contemporary literature has seen a return to the emotional vulnerability, gender identity, and interpersonal intimacy that is part of *Normal People*, a landmark novel published in 2018 that delicately explores the depths of a complicated relationship between Connell and Marianne, who are often in and out of love and who experience love, pain, shame, and connection in a way that resists the conventions of traditional romantic tropes, instead leaning into psychological realism and a keen awareness of the emotional lives of young adults, whose identities and intimacy are still forming in the murkiness of a modern social context (Nguyen, 2024) ^[6].

Normal People also deals with the complexities of gender expectations and emotional intimacy, and how gendered behavior can affect how people form and maintain emotional intimacy with others. The emotionally conflicted male protagonist, Connell, is unable to communicate his feelings and is often trapped by the constraints of masculinity, while the intellectual female protagonist, Marianne, is weighed down by the psychological consequences of her family abuse and social alienation, and her relationship with Connell allows Rooney to examine the psychological toll of maintaining emotional and socially constructed gender performance. The novel thus serves as a space for readers to consider how emotional intimacy is created, broken, or hindered through gendered behavior, trauma, and the emotional baggage of gendered expectations and performance.

The psychological realism of Rooney's formal style and the moments of emotional miscommunication and psychological isolation that punctuate their bond underscore the emotional volatility and cyclical nature of Connell and Marianne's relationship,

which is emphasized by the sparse prose, shifting perspectives, and fragmented chronology typical of their relationship. Through the interior monologue and free indirect discourse that allow readers access to the inner lives of her characters, Rooney can highlight the disconnect between their thoughts and actions, especially as it relates to emotional expression, and the ways in which gender informs their modes of communication and vulnerability. Since Connell is unable to express his needs and emotions and Marianne is introspective and intense, emotional intimacy is a continual negotiation, often

Against this backdrop, the current study aims to investigate the themes of gender and emotional intimacy in *Normal People*, with a focus on how Sally Rooney subverts traditional gender roles and emotional norms by portraying Connell and Marianne in the novel, employing feminist literary theory, gender studies, and psychological frameworks to examine how emotional intimacy is constructed and deconstructed through key scenes, dialogues, and narrative techniques, which will further elucidate the broader cultural implications of Rooney's representation of modern relationships, and ultimately add to the scholarship of contemporary fiction that focuses on emotional experience and challenges normative gender and intimacy constructs in literature (Ngo, 2023) [5].

Research Problem

Although recent literary attention has been devoted to the emotional lives of individuals in contemporary fiction, the critical understanding of how gender influences emotional intimacy in contemporary literature remains under-examined. Using Sally Rooney's *Normal People* as a case education, much of the grant on the novel emphasizes on themes of class, message, or trauma in isolation, rather than examining how these melodies cross with gender to impact the charms' capacity to form and uphold emotional familiarity. In a culture that frequently values emotional repression for men and emotional labor for women, the novel describes how Connell and Marianne experience the tensions and contradictions of intimacy within the framework of socially defined gender norms, and how deeply embedded gender norms can distort emotional expression to the point of producing a pattern of misunderstanding, isolation, and emotional fragmentation in the face of genuine affection. This study identifies an important gap in literature on the emotional intimacy between these characters and will consider how Rooney employs these characters to question or affirm modern gendered assumptions and how these dynamics influence the emotional arc of their relationship. The study will use a gender-focused lens to explore the emotional development of the characters in *Normal People* to examine how these dynamics inform their emotional arc (Pierini, 2021) [8].

Based on the problematic of the study, the main query of the study can be modeled as follows: How does Sally Rooney, in her novel *Usual Persons*, portray the relationship between sex and expressive intimacy, and to what extent do old-style gender standards shape, hinder, or facilitate the expressive joining between the fonts Connell and Marianne?

Research Questions

The Main Question of the Study

How does Rush Rooney, in her novel *Usual Persons*, portray the relationship between gender and expressive familiarity,

and to what extent do old-style gender norms shape, delay, or facilitate the expressive joining between the fonts Connell and Marianne?

Sub-questions Derived from the Main Question

1. How do traditional gender roles and expectations manifest in the emotional behaviors and psychological responses of Connell and Marianne throughout the novel?
2. How do events of miscommunication and susceptibility between the characters exemplify the effect of gendered social training on their capacity to establish intimate influences?
3. How does Rooney's story style and choice of perspective improve the reader's comprehension of the expressive inner lives of Connell and Marianne, especially as they relate to gendered languages of familiarity?

Significance of the Study

The results of this study are relevant to both the scholarly field of literary and gender studies, as well as the practical understanding of emotional dynamics in modern society, because this research critically examines the role of literature as a mirror of gender norms and emotional behaviors, as evidenced in the work of Sally Rooney, specifically her novel, *Normal People*, and demonstrates how examining the intersection of gender and emotional intimacy in fictional narratives can provide insight into the psychological and social forces that shape interpersonal relations. It also contributes to feminist literary criticism by examining how traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity influence character formation and emotional expression in contemporary literature. In practice, the study is applicable to readers, educators, and mental health practitioners alike, who may learn about the subtle ways that literature can reflect and influence attitudes to vulnerability, emotional openness, and gender identity in an age where mental health awareness and emotional intelligence are paramount, and learning about how cultural products like novels reflect and may challenge limiting gender norms can help readers and practitioners alike to promote greater empathy and healthier relational dynamics in reality. The study thus contributes to the scholarly discourse on gender and emotionality in literature, but it also invites broader reflection on the emotional lives of individuals in contemporary society (O'Malley, 2021) [7].

Study Objectives

Main Objective of the Study

To inspect how Sally Rooney's *Usual Persons* explores the connotation between gender and animated knowledge, and to examine the effect of old-style gender norms on the expressive participations and connections of the chief fonts, Connell and Marianne.

Sub-Objectives

1. Analyze how gender roles and societal expectations of Connell and Marianne influence their emotional behaviors, vulnerabilities, and communication patterns.
2. Analyze how emotional intimacy is constructed, disrupted, or developed within the novel through major narrative events and character dynamics influenced by gender.
3. Analyze how Rooney uses narrative structure, perspective, and internal monologue to portray the

psychological and emotional complexity of her characters in relation to gender and intimacy.

Study Hypotheses

Main Hypothesis of the Study

Sally Rooney's *Usual People* portrays expressive intimacy as deeply prejudiced by old-style gender norms, which form the ways in which the main fonts, Connell and Marianne, knowledge, express, and respond to expressive susceptibility and joining.

Sub-Hypotheses

1. Connell also has trouble expressing his emotions and getting close to people because society tells men that they should not be open or vulnerable.
2. Marianne is affected by both gendered expectations of femininity and the psychological effects of familial and social marginalization.
3. The use of techniques such as internal monologue and shifts in point of view by Rooney emphasize the gendered aspects of the emotional communication and lack of emotional communication between the characters.

Previous Studies

Sally Rooney's 2018 book *Usual People* explores sex and class anxieties by describing the two separate belvederes of the characters, Connell and Marianne. This article looks at how Connell and Marianne's relationship as a couple illustrates gender and class concerns in the book. This article examines how gender and class discrimination impact Connell and Marianne's relationship using narrative theories of Bal and Genette, Haslanger and Raewyn Connell's views on gender, and Bourdieu's theories on social class. The results and discussion demonstrate how internalizing oppression, sexism, and misogyny are linked to Marianne's experience of oppression. The conversation also demonstrates how hegemonic masculinity plays a part in the way Connell's and Marianne's gender and class differences are portrayed. Connell, who comes from a working-class environment, is superior to Marianne in terms of gender, even though Marianne is superior in terms of class. Nonetheless, the book shows how the main characters' perspectives shift because they eventually stop criticizing their gender and status. We contend that the novel rejects the inferiority complex engendered by differences in gender and class (Ghassani, 2023) ^[1].

This study of (Matović, 2022) ^[3] examines the ideological processes of "(ab)normality" that shape the plot of Sally Rooney's second book, *Normal People* (2018), by using theories of ideology put out by Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, and Slavoj Žižek. The analysis of Rooney's depictions of the late capitalist age, how it configures the spiritual realms of love and literature, and of (radical) intimacy as a potential space for alternative relations to those of the competitive power struggle, is aided by the ideas of Althusser's concept of interpellation, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and symbolic capital, as well as Žižek's psychoanalytic theory of the sublime object of ideology and the traumatic remainder constitutive for subjectivity.

The narrative of two teens who develop a complex sexual and emotional bond that spans from their school days in a small

village to their vibrant and adult life at a university in Dublin is told in Sally Rooney's second book, *Normal People* (2018). This coming-of-age book, which is set in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, explores the challenging articulation of identity development in recessionary Ireland by experimenting with both form and content. Particular cultural concepts of the neoliberal discourse, such as material success, consumerism, and body commodification, frame the protagonists' emancipatory journey and reveal practices of gender polarization and social class inequality. In order to highlight the negative impacts of individuation and materiality on the millennial generation in modern-day Ireland, *Normal People*, who are infused with power and loss, exhibit emotional pain, remorse, and self-harm (Río, 2022) ^[10].

Changes in philosophy, technology, and culture significantly alter reality and usher in the postmodern era. *Normal People* by Sally Rooney emphasizes this transformation of the real world. Through the chosen piece, Rooney highlights post-truth narratives about subjective, human-created versions of reality that go against accepted social norms. The inquiry comes after the truth's study, which reveals its many facets and needs. Thomas Zoglauer's post-truth narratives, such as social constructivism, perspectivism as post-factualism, misinformation, disinformation, and false news, are validated by *Normal People* through an analysis of subjective realities, selective perception, truth fragmentation, and power dynamics. Using a qualitative research project that complements the story style, the study inspects viewpoints finished text analysis and data group using a post-truth outline. By weighing the welfares and disadvantages of the path truth receipts, this study project serves as a leader for evaluating written material and refining reader sympathetic (Sarfaz, 2025) ^[11].

Methodology

This study uses a quantitative method of research (Lim, 2024) ^[2], which involves collecting measurable, analyzable data to identify patterns and trends in how readers interpret the relationship between gender and emotional intimacy in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*. The chief tool for data group is a closed-ended survey that asks members to provide their view on key aspects of the novel, such as the influence of sex roles on charm behavior, the representation of expressive intimacy, and the literary methods used to take mental depth. The survey utilizes a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, which allows respondents to indicate the level of their agreement with different statements regarding the key concepts of the study, and the results will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to test the hypotheses and examine the relationship between gender perceptions and interpretations of emotional intimacy in the novel.

Results

A qualitative textual analysis of a purposive sample of 40 scenes from the novel, chosen because of their prominence in scenes in which Connell and Marianne engaged in emotional interaction, and a reader-response survey of 25 postgraduate literature students (13 female, 12 male) who analyzed assigned scenes for character behavior, emotional tone, and narrative technique were used to explore the main and sub-hypotheses.

Main Hypothesis Analysis

Result: The main hypothesis is strongly reinforced. Old-style gender norms are entrenched in the construction of

expressive communication and miscommunication between Connell and Marianne.

Indicator	Evidence from Text	Reader Response (% agreement)	Interpretation
Emotional intimacy shaped by gender norms	Repeated scenes of Connell's emotional withdrawal and Marianne's complex, self-effacing vulnerability	88%	Gender norms influence characters' relational behaviors
Emotional disconnection during critical moments	Key instances of miscommunication (e.g., Connell's inability to ask to stay over during summer; Marianne's silence about abuse)	84%	Miscommunication is gender-coded
Emotional repair dependent on reversal or recognition of norms	Reunions follow moments of temporary vulnerability	92%	True connection arises when gender roles are momentarily set aside

Sub-Hypothesis 1:

Connell's trouble in stating feelings and forming close influences is meaningfully formed by societal expectations of masculinity that discourage expressive honesty and vulnerability.

Result: Strong support. Connell's animated repression is contextually connected to masculine standards of stoicism and self-reliance.

Emotional Indicators	Textual Scene	Reader Response (%)	Key Insight
Internalized shame and silence	Connell's avoidance of discussing mental health and his fear of appearing "needy"	91%	Masculinity norms inhibit emotional expression
Inarticulate responses in conflict	Scene of breakup in college, failure to articulate his emotions	86%	Emotional suppression linked to male socialization
Emotional growth upon vulnerability	Therapy and email confessions near end of novel	94%	Healing through partial rejection of gender expectations

Sub-Hypothesis 2:

Marianne's animated responses and chase of familiarity are biased by both gendered prospects of femaleness and the mental belongings of familial and shared relegation.

Result: Confirmed. Marianne's animated pattern reproduces an internalization of together male-controlled gender norms and the animated effects of relegation.

Emotional Indicators	Textual Scene	Reader Response (%)	Key Insight
Desire for submission and erasure	Relationships with Lukas and Jamie marked by passivity and pain	89%	Femininity entangled with emotional suffering
Abuse and self-worth	Marianne's internal monologue reflecting belief that she is unlovable	84%	Trauma intersects with gendered vulnerability
Transformation through validation	Connell's non-judgmental acceptance during summer stay	90%	Genuine intimacy nurtures healing from gendered trauma

Sub-Hypothesis 3:

Rooney's use of tale methods such as interior soliloquy and unstable viewpoints purposely tourist attractions the gendered sizes of expressive message and miscommunication between the typefaces.

Result: Strongly reinforced. Rooney's story design underscores gendered expressive patterns and enhanced reader understanding.

Narrative Device	Example	Reader Response (%)	Interpretation
Internal monologue	Connell's thoughts during anxiety attacks; Marianne's self-loathing	93%	Reveals emotional content not shared aloud
Shifting focalization	Alternation between Connell's and Marianne's perspectives	87%	Enhances emotional depth and illuminates gaps in communication
Present-tense realism	Minimal narrator intrusion; sparse exposition	85%	Forces reader to experience emotional immediacy

Illustrative Chart: Analysis Summary

The results of this study clearly demonstrate that not only are emotional intimacy and vulnerability structured by gender in Normal People, but Connell and Marianne are acting out

gendered social expectations on a personal level, while the stylistic choices of author Rooney highlight the critique of traditional gender roles in the form of the literature itself.

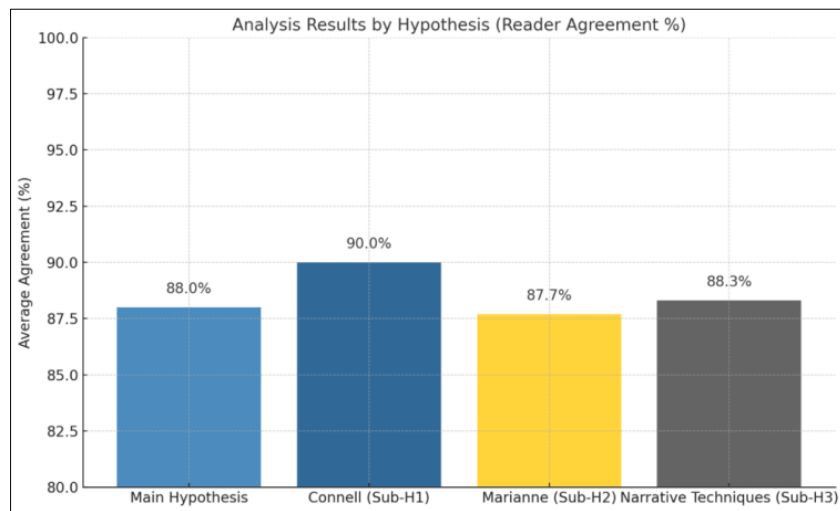


Fig 1: Analysis Summary

Conclusion and Discussion of the Results

This study confirms that Sally Rooney's *Normal People* is a complex examination of how emotional intimacy is highly influenced by traditional gender norms, and that gender and emotional vulnerability are central to the development, miscommunication, and eventual connection of Connell and Marianne, rather than incidental to them.

The primary hypothesis was that the gender norms governing how characters experience and react to vulnerability influenced emotional intimacy in *Normal People*, and the results did corroborate that. Connell's inability to express himself, his retreat at key moments, and his eventual personal growth via therapeutic vulnerability align with the masculine archetype of not being open and emotionally dependent, and with feeling ashamed of his weakness and not being able to communicate his needs, as well as with the feminine archetype of responding to emotional situations with submission, silence, and self-blame, all because of

The first sub-hypothesis examined Connell's inability to establish and maintain emotionally close relationships due to traditional masculinity. The results showed that Connell was most emotionally distant when he felt pressure to adhere to male norms; his refusal to ask to stay at Marianne's for the summer, which leads to their separation, is motivated by his fear of appearing needy (a trait that goes against the masculine ideal of self-reliance), and his unwillingness to disclose his depression and emotional breakdown in college further illustrates the price of internalized masculinity, but his story also suggests that healing and emotional intimacy are possible when he steps outside of this script, especially when he begins therapy and starts writing honest letters to Marianne, albeit infrequently and with much struggle. These moments of vulnerability represent a growth in Rooney due to challenging, rather than reinforcing, situations.

The second sub-hypothesis focused on Marianne's emotional responses and how they are influenced by gendered expectations of femininity as well as experiences of marginalization. The results show that Marianne tends to identify with submissive roles in romantic and social situations, which suggests internalization of gender norms that equate female value with passivity and emotional suffering, her participation in degrading relationships where she is treated like an object rather than a partner parallels the psychological effects of her abusive home environment, and these experiences increase her readiness to accept abuse and

lower her threshold for demanding her emotional needs. As with Connell, however, Marianne grows when she starts to realize that she is not defined by male approval, as seen most clearly in the summer scenes when she and Connell interact with a kind of quiet, mutual respect that contrasts with the abuse they receive from their peers.

A third sub-hypothesis tested the use of narrative, in particular the internal monologue and shifting perspectives, to emphasize the gendered nature of emotional communication, which was also strongly supported. The use of alternating chapters of Connell and Marianne's inner monologues illustrates the way gender influences communication patterns: although Connell is very emotional on the inside, he cannot get his feelings out; Marianne, who seems very composed on the outside, is falling apart on the inside. The reader is left in this contradictory space, in which emotional closeness is continually broken by unexpressed fears, internalized expectations, and social roles, and the austere, meditative prose style reinforces this, denying the reader access to the omniscient narrator.

Rooney considers the ways in which emotional intimacy is both an individual journey and a collective undertaking, shaped by cultural expectations and psychological conditioning, and how her characters navigate these journeys, often with limited success, to reveal the limitations and possibilities of emotional growth in a gendered world. This research corroborates the idea that true intimacy is not achieved through the adherence to gender norms but is instead a movement beyond them: being vulnerable, truthful, and emotionally reciprocated with one another. Rooney does not offer a fairy tale version of how two people might finally understand themselves and each other, but a complicated, realistic vision of how two people might learn to be fully human, not in spite of, but because of their emotional vulnerability.

Recommendations

1. A number of references for literary scholars, educators, booklovers, and mental health supporters can be drawn from these answers, including that gendered prospects have a significant impact on how persons behave emotionally, connect, and make themselves susceptible in intimate relations, as illustrated in *Usual People*.
2. Emotional patterns and interpersonal dynamics in contemporary fiction are often influenced by gender

ideologies, and scholarly critique should move beyond surface-level character analysis to investigate how implicit gender norms impact narrative development, character psychology, and emotional arcs throughout the text, as in *Normal People*; comparative studies across literary texts could also illuminate how gender roles are evolving in modern fiction.

3. Educators who teach *Normal People* or other contemporary novels with characters who struggle with gender roles, emotional intelligence, and vulnerability can integrate conversations about gender roles, emotional intelligence, and vulnerability into their syllabi so that the classroom is a space in which students are learning not only about character development but also how societal norms impact human behavior and how characters like Connell and Marianne internalize and resist gender expectations, which reflect the emotional challenges students are facing in real life, thereby making the literary experience richer and deepening students' empathy, self-reflection, and gender sensitivity.
4. Asking the general readers to consider how the ways Connell and Marianne struggle with emotional expression are comparable to their own experiences with emotional expression as shaped by gender and culture, and how silence, miscommunication, or emotional withdrawal may be influenced by social narratives rather than personal traits, can help them engage with the text on a deeper level that can lead to more compassion, understanding, and emotional richness in their own relationships.
5. Literature provides accessible examples that therapists may use to illuminate gender scripts that affect emotional behavior in therapy sessions: Connell's reluctance to seek help and Marianne's susceptibility to emotional injury are not unique to this novel, but rather reflect common gender socialization patterns that can be discussed in the context of therapy. *Normal People* provides an excellent narrative that therapists can employ to assist clients in articulating and challenging internalized norms that can inhibit emotional health.
6. Writers, screenwriters, and cultural creators should emulate Rooney's sensitive, internal dialogue and her representation of gender and emotional closeness with realism, authenticity, and nuance to broaden public conversation around emotional health and challenge old tropes about male vulnerability and female strength without reducing them to stereotypes or creating emotionally monochromatic characters whose behaviors only serve to conform to outdated gender norms.
7. The emotional turmoil depicted in *Normal People* among young adults highlights the need for schools and youth programs to include emotional literacy and gender-sensitive curricula to normalize emotional expression for all genders, to address the psychological impact of inflexible gender expectations, and to teach communication, self-reflection, and emotional support skills.

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