

Analysing Paradigms of Pain in the BBC Adaptation of Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

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Abstract: Throughout the literary canon, the theme of love has been employed to understand the anomalies of a text's characters and its writing period. Love has been represented in multiple shades: love that is undying, mistaken, obsessed and also unrequited. A shade of love that defines the relationship dynamics of the youth today is love that is painful. Young love and the pain that is its antithesis is also a tried and tested trope. In all its forms, love brings forth a transformation of both individuals and eras. The stories that ensue serve as an allegory to understand generational trends. Be it Austen's novels, where the rise of the gentry is focused, or Marquez's web of love triangles, where a continent's evolution through an epidemic is recorded.

This paper suggests that in all its forms, the transformations brought upon by love lead to a definite shift and settling of the problematised individuals and eras. Still, the painful young love today is elusive of any resolution. The paper is an attempt at understanding how this narrative ties into the working of the young adult minds as depicted in the visually provoking BBC miniseries adaptation of Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, where growing up becomes an exercise to exorcise the traumas of the past and present expectations. Drawing from Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism, Nietzsche's nihilism as portrayed through the cinematography, Plato's allegory of the cave and John Rawls' veil of ignorance, the paper delves into the self-sabotaging mechanisms that the young protagonists of the series normalise and employ in search of their identity and unravel the threads that sew the collective tapestry of the mind of young adults today.

Keywords: Young, Adult, Pain, Identity, Class, Mind

Introduction

An interesting term that has gained currency among the youth of today's generation is the word 'gaslighting'. The dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster had chosen 'gaslighting' as its word of the year in 2022, with BBC reports suggesting that searches for the word had spiked by 1,740% in 2022 on the dictionary publisher's website. Merriam-Webster defines the word as follows:

1. Psychological manipulation of a person, usually over an extended period of time, causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, the uncertainty of one's emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator.
2. The act or practice of grossly misleading someone, especially for one's own advantage.

Etymologically, the word 'gaslight' was used to describe a type of lamp that used a jet of burning gas to light up, particularly used as streetlights in Victorian-era Britain and the continent. The prevailing definition of the term originates from a 1938 thriller play written by Patrick Hamilton titled *Gas Light*, in which characters are engaged in deceiving or rather 'gaslighting' each other under the symbolic presence of flickering gaslights. With further reproductions of the play and eventual screen adaptations, the most notable being the 1944 cinematic adaptation with the same title starring Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman, the word came to embody its present meaning.

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* delves into the workings of the young adult mind and presents a narrative that explores the normalising the gaslighting of young, seemingly ordinary people by each other driven by paradigms of pain rooted in human conditions. Rooney questions the perceived realities of the collective society by problematising the grand narratives that encapsulate the ideas of love and identity. The serialised visual representation of the text and the symbolic interpretation of the state of the protagonists, confused lovers Connell and Marianne, vividly dissect through the constructs of cultural configuration to reveal the absurdity of existence and the hurt that everyone

hosts within themselves. In problematising the understanding of the youth and its peculiarities, Rooney unsettles the receivers of her text by introducing the receiver to a similar state of unease experienced by the characters. For this, the narrative structure undertakes the perception of pain as the core motif of the text, where pain is represented as not only painful but also pleasing and a defence mechanism, eventually probing into the world of sadism and masochism.

We understand that sadism is deriving pleasure from someone else's pain, and masochism is deriving pleasure from one's own pain. The relationship dynamics of Gen Z friendships and affairs are bizarrely based on hurting oneself and each other, either physically or emotionally. The text represents this as the two young protagonists traverse the precarious time of high school life. In school, people assert their presence by belittling the black sheep of the lot, bullying them or hurting them by making inappropriate remarks. The bully seems to attain a sense of control or vindication by doing this because they are hurt by the confidence of the black sheep to act as a lone wolf somewhere within. Marianne faces the brunt of this at home and school for being smart and evolving into a distant and detached adult. If a member of the school pack seems to deviate from doing the ethical thing, then the group at large feel hurt because somehow doing the right thing seems wrong to this generation. Connell receives the dejected glares of his friends when he comforts Marianne and decides to move to Dublin to pursue a better education and future. Inflicting hurt on others for whatever hurt they are going through is the only process that makes sense. Friends will gaslight each other into staying in a friendship, even if it's clear that the group's purpose has been served or it is time to move on.

Similarly, in Gen Z romantic relationships, it has become increasingly difficult to avoid hindrances in each other's ambitions, as their partnership is defined as toxic. Partners hurt each other by engaging and uttering things that push them to despicable conditions, all the while being aware that it will hurt them both. They are hurt due to their churlish behaviours, but they will still hold on to limit each other. It is like they deny amputating an outgrown decaying piece of flesh while being aware that the infection is steadily spreading in the body. They will hurt each other to control one

another by making the other compliant, docile and dependent on them. All of this develops a cycle of inflicting pain on one another in return for being hurt themselves. Rooney brings into the limelight the absurdity of such ceaseless relationships. The only justification for sustaining such a pernicious cycle is that the certainty of pain and the ways to deal with it enables young adults to escape the uncertainty of the future, leading to a nihilistic existence. Gen Z thus derives its identity from this cycle, this constant clash between sadism and masochism.

Connell

I think I thought if I . . . moved here . . . I'd fit in better . . . meet more like-minded people, but that just hasn't . . . I left Carriclea thinking I could have a different life. But I . . . I hate it here and . . . I can never go back. (Episode 10 00:20:30 – 00:21:16)

Freudian psychology dictates that the self is unknown to the unconscious mind, and the innate impulses which manifest our discernible actions stay imperceptible to us. In *Normal People*, the protagonists exhibit such sudden impulses that form their social actions of self-discovery and self-preservation. In this oscillating paradigm of dual existence, where they persevere to balance between the tightrope of candid expression and defence mechanism, they occupy a precarious position of uncertainty, which leaves their present relationships and efforts unhinged. The response to such a painful existence that Connell and Marianne develop contrasts one another, but they both lead to the same road of self-sabotage.

Connell's response to life is a brand of mute stoicism that warrants silent suffering, often leading to emotional turmoil. His stoic behaviour is his attempt to conform to the social norms in a congenial manner (which gains him people's validation) to conceal his ill-begotten vulnerabilities rising from the inhibitions that restrict him from truly cherishing anything. His qualms originate from his misgivings regarding his family's working-class position in the closely-knit Irish society. The reservation, rooted in this, makes Connell susceptible to feeling society's gaze, which haunts his consciousness in the form of societal expectations from a gifted and intelligent working-class boy. His stoicism is a veil to shield his excessive self-conscious and demure personality.

Although Connell cherishes the family values that support him, he also wishes to shed them to escape his limitations. He faces a similar dilemma when he has to leave the small town of Sligo behind to pursue higher academics at Trinity College, Dublin. He knows what he wants and understands that going to Dublin will lead to a brighter future, but he still harbours qualms about leaving his friends and mother behind. In the process, he regresses into a stoic stupor of disassociation with people.

The aftermath of the 2008 Irish recession, which serves as the text's socio-political background, becomes evident primarily through Connell's financial insecurity. The class struggle in Irish society is represented through the underlying tension that steadily grows between Connell and Marianne's relationship dynamics. Connell's sense of identity is strongly linked to his financial struggles and the sustenance of a Sisyphean persona perpetually engaged in a herculean task. This can be observed in the manner in which, despite being academically gifted and agreeable to people, Connell downplays his intelligence and charisma to constantly try to disassociate with people and escape bonding at an extensive level.

The class struggle becomes more palpable, and the class difference is heightened in the tense transactions between Connell and Marianne, where the former always broods over avoiding situations, leading to future anxious hindsight. The causal reason for this can be traced to the employment of Connell's mother in Marianne's house as a maid. He carries a silent chip on the shoulder that mauls his consciousness whenever he encounters Marianne as a peer in school and college and as his love interest in social spaces. The dynamics of this are also represented through the disparity in the quality of life made available to both of them by their working and single mothers. The class tension is evident in how both the parent explicitly exhibits their inferior and superior positions, respectively. While his relationship with Marianne does become a catalyst for self-discovery, there is always the lingering feeling of internalised biases and the devaluation of self-worth. Marianne sees the end of their brief but happy romance as a result of Connell's reservations;

he views it as an affirmation of his unavoidable embarrassment of their class difference, in both cases eluding individual and narrative resolution.

Analysing Connell's representation through the lens of Søren Kierkegaard's three stages of existence, we can surmise that there is a distinct existential despair, an inner turmoil that brings out the emptiness in Connell, which is further accentuated following the suicide of his friend back home. The inconsistencies in his romantic rendezvous with Marianne, which prolongs even after college can be observed as the aesthetic stage of existence surrounded by intense impulses of self-discovery, the irresolute resolution of which ushers in the ethical stage of developing an objective approach to circumstances where he decides to leave behind his adolescent connections and move ahead in life. However, in the third religious stage, where the individual usually seeks the deeper meaning of existence, Connell descends into a state of confusion abetted by the shock of the sudden demise of his friend, for which he feels partly responsible for leaving him and all behind to move into the city.

Connell's lack of an individual identity becomes agonisingly visible in bits and pieces: His insecure orbiting of Marianne's path whilst being vague about his feelings for her, the curated obsequious mannerisms rising from a crawler mentality which wrecks his consciousness, and the self-imposed isolation from truly preserving relationships. The systematic suppression of emotions cramped into smaller and smaller places within, in a methodical attempt to keep his excruciating struggler personality afloat, leads him to face Kierkegaard's existential paradox that eventually everything leads to regrets, no matter what choices one makes or path one follows. Connell's pregnant mind thus painfully cracks with the burden of his guilty consciousness of never living and connecting to the fullest. The weight which he carries around like an albatross around his neck prompts him to state as follows when subjected to clinical sessions for treating depression:

I don't really click with a lot of people. I struggle with that, actually . . . in school, I definitely felt that feeling of isolation or whatever. But, um . . . People seem to like me . . . and . .

. here, [in Dublin] I don't think . . . people like me that much. (Episode 10 00:18:12 – 00:19:04)

Marianne

We're not done here. . . Don't move. . . You're worthless. You're nothing.

(Episode 9 00:06:27-00:06:50)

A recurring phenomenon can be observed in literary texts that seek to dissect the layers of society and present forth the omnipresent conflicted state of affairs. This phenomenon is responsible for revealing the cynicism of a social system that insists on curbing individuality for the cause of the perceived greater and moral good. It is the presence of the modern protagonist. Marianne occupies a similar position in *Normal People*. She is a protagonist in a text authored and set in the 21st century, but she is a modern protagonist owing to archetypal similarities she shares with past fictional modernist figures.

Similar to James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Marianne faces the pangs of sexual desires. Similar to D.H. Lawrence's Paul Morel, she oscillates between lovers while getting hurt in the process, and similar to W. Somerset Maugham's Peter Carey, Marianne is detached from the family as she carries a physical impediment (in her case-masochism). They are all social pariahs in their way of looking through the world's hypocrisy and occupying a precarious position of residing in the grey area of society, i.e., being alone and not belonging to any social group. In their effort to transcend the agonising duplicity of their community, they tend to embark on a voluntary exile from their social milieu, oftentimes experiencing epiphanic episodes. These characters attain resolution in their quest as they settle for a stoic approach to initiate their process of self-actualisation. This is where Marianne differs from them. She does not attain any resolution to the question of existence through her quest. She rather finds a cycle of pain as an inevitable end encompassing herself and the people around her in their life transactions. In contrast, Marianne is rather too smart and above trivial things to even barely notice the very existence of such a cycle. But, when she does, she is faced with an existential crisis of what is right and wrong.

Compared to Connell's idiosyncrasies that can be characterised as being conformist, Marianne consistently exhibits an iconoclastic temperament that becomes persona non grata within the small society of County Sligo. Unlike Connell, her decision to leave behind her family and the small town for Dublin is not marred with hesitations. The abnormal hostility that haunts her family and erupts in the form of domestic violence and gaslighting each other to normalise being environed in such an abusive state made the decision all the easier. The initial break-up with Connell served as added motivation to an already resolute decision to move out of the well. Similar to Connell, the transition from the country to the city again unleashes Marianne's subsequent stages of existence.

Faced with the already erratic household situation and the obtuse school system, which comes forth as inconsiderate towards eccentric minds within a small town marked with class tensions, Marianne's aesthetic stage of existence can be noted to be one of rebellious in nature driven by inquisitiveness to challenge the conventions. Her sardonic behaviour in questioning the position of authority in school and in her house, combined with her mordant humour in dealing with her peers, gives her a contemptuous air to an otherwise wounded and impressionable consciousness. It is this bleak state of affairs that fills her with an ache to feel passionate, which fuels her desire to know, understand and make love to Connell, breaking the class hierarchies. The separation from County Sligo and Connell does not bring an end to Marianne's aesthetic stage yet. She ventures forth in oscillating between several romantic relationships and academic prudence accompanied by an enigmatic aura of ambiguity. The ethical stage comes forth with Marianne witnessing the triviality of human existence through the tumultuous human relationships that come her way, observing that, at the most intrinsic level, everything leads to nothing. This nothingness envelops Marianne's consciousness as she proceeds towards the religious stage of existence and discovers that every path leads to pain and regret. But this is where she differs from Kierkegaard's doctrine and Connell's response. Unlike Connell, she does not yield to a mental breakdown, nor does she identify with Kierkegaard's opinion of God and religion as the only sane path to overcome the existential paradox of perpetual and painful regrets. She accepts the painful existence of humans not with the spiritual

hope for salvation but with the intent to relish the very pain that exudes from existence. She replaces theological submission with that of submission to pain.

Marianne is the only one who truly unleashes the inherent core of mankind. To live in a hedonic manner and revel in pain. She is brave enough to face the human reality and accept it all. Rooting from her family's abusive domestic paradigm and her own turbulent relations, she chooses to embrace the perpetual presence of pain in its most crude and human form by eventually succumbing to masochism. Her practice of pain is intensified when she sees Connell, the person closest to her, deviate from his stoic manner to dwell in a depressive state of painful regrets. Her painful existence is cold and detached, symbolised by her move to Sweden, historically an inaccessible and hostile part of the continent, which she describes in her correspondence with Connell as follows:

I feel so not myself at the moment. Not in a bad way. I just feel outside of my own life somehow. . . And there's something comforting about it. Something good about feeling sort of numb. Detached from it all. Does that make sense? (Episode 9 00:06:58-00:07:32)

Her sexuality is a symbolic representation and fruition of it all. In her attempt to revel in pain, she also breaks the archetypal structure of female protagonists whose resolution to romantic and worldly pain/humiliation is oftentimes suicide. She breaks the curse by choosing to live and not die like Ophelia or Hedda Gabler. Instead of struggling against the pain, she gives in to the pain, and in her attempt to explore the pits of human humiliation, she loses the ability to love without suffering. Her existence and quest lead to no resolution of her hatred for her family, for herself and her love of Connell. She finds pain in all spheres and resides in the perpetual cycle of self-sabotage.

Writer to Viewer

While the book reads like a report of the characters' lives, the screen offers a much more intimate view. The serialised cinematic representation of the plot brings to life the recurring gaps in communication. Miscommunication, or the lack of it, results from the consistent individual and collective crises the characters face throughout the plot. The audio-visual medium of the text brings to the foreground a paradox that contests the very medium of storytelling. The interesting thing to

observe is how the text undergoes spatial temporality as it is transformed in the form of motion pictures that make the nihilistic environment palpable explicitly on the surface of the text, i.e., the faces and body language of the characters as observed by the viewers. In contrast, the book's implicit manner of plot revelation renders a readerly effect compared to the screenplay adaptation, where the series transforms into a writerly text. In the case of the book, the sterile readers remain a dormant absorber of the reports of the characters' lives, where the internal emotions are narrated for them. Whereas, in the series, the viewer is turned into an observant and sensitive voyeur of a very intimate and seemingly real union, who takes notes of the fidgety silences of, and awkward sex among, the characters enveloped within a palpable tension over their futures.

The paradoxes of the characters' lives are made more perceptible as episodes are concluded in the series by playing cultural and time-specific soundtracks as the credits are being rolled. These soundtracks, almost all by contemporary Irish and English artists, take up a characteristic of their own, as they act as the creator's box of commentary upon the events depicted in the particular episodes, performing the binding functions of an epilogue and encouraging diverse viewer interpretation. This effect is achieved as the author herself becomes the screenwriter, ironically following Roland Barthes' theory, for the screenplay adaptation to orchestrate the 'death of the author' to bestow interpretive liberty to the viewer.

Connell and Marianne occupy different positions in Nietzsche's master-slave morality paradigm. Connell internalises the slave mentality, whereas Marianne breaks through the moral boundaries to attain her highest power and splendour while encouraging sadism in her partners as an act of breaking the conventions. A lot of this is emphasised by the cinematography of the text that heightens the underlying nihilism which the characters embody against the world's vastness. The various camera shots project the characters unhinged against their surrounding:

1. The wide-angle shot juxtaposes the characters against their physical environment.

This shot is used to portray Connell flustered in the halls of Trinity College, feeling

uncomfortable and small in his new world. Also, Marianne always looks small and petite in her large house compared to her family.

3. The off-centred shot presents the duality of a particular situation or circumstance within a specific scene. It is used prominently to display Marianne and Connell's different positions intertwined. For instance, when Connell arrives uninvited to Marianne's house party seeking help after being bloodied and mugged. The contrasting social positions and experiences are reflected in these frames.
4. The shallow depth of field shot shifts everything out of focus to let the viewer concentrate on the characters and their immediate surrounding. This shot can be witnessed when the viewers find Connell wandering around heartbroken in Sligo and Dublin and also when Marianne seemingly gets awkward among peers and looks vulnerable with her lovers while engaging in masochism and giving in to the carnal submission to nothingness.
5. The numerous behind-the-head tracking shots present forth the point of view of an omnipresent stalker who is engaged in keeping a tab of the character's movements. This also brings forth an experiential element in the voyeurism the viewers engage in. For instance, this shot follows Marianne entering the raffle party at school or Connell entering Trinity College for the first time. The viewers/voyeurs become a part of the character's journey, and the negation of the facial expressions of the characters in these shots facilitates diverse interpretations.

All of these independent fragments of visual representation organically come together to form a keen sense of relatability, which is established between the characters represented and the viewers perceiving the representation, as contemporary insights of being powerless against the superstructures of society amalgamate into the picture of a real human relationship on screen. Thus turning the episodic medium of serialisation into an experiential form driven forward by both the object and the observer.

Conclusion

Love, young and passionate love, is a reckless yet intriguing way for a story to begin. Sally Rooney's *Normal People* puts love under scrutiny and finds love that is painful to be both agonising and healing, binding yet emancipating, that leaves permanent marks. Connell and Marianne's passionate relationship of miscommunications and blunders, and yet utmost respect for each other, forms a very complicated, sometimes unlikable pair that often holds a mirror up to the receiver of the text. They reside in a Platonic dimension of paradoxes. They both feel reality to be abstract, and the essence of life eludes them in a realm of idealism. The narrator thus states that:

Marianne had the sense that her real life was happening somewhere very far away, happening without her, and she didn't know if she would ever find out where it was or become part of it. (Rooney 11)

Again, it is because they are prisoners of Plato's allegorical cave, who fail to see the true nature of each other, that they begin to realise the limits to conventional morality. They occupy the paradoxical paradigm where they have chosen to leave the cave and see the world for themselves and yet long for the comfort of the cave—the presence of one another. Marianne thus ponders:

He probably won't come back . . . Or he will, differently. What they have now, they can never have back again. [Yet], You should go, she says. (Rooney 273)

But the serialised medium of motion pictures leaves the viewers wanting more. This is where the writer hands the reader a stencil to fill out the gaps in the almost-done canvas. The shallow depth of field shot shifts everything out of focus to let the viewer concentrate on the final scenes, bringing in the calm in the chaos.

Now, consider how the characters would choose the principles of justice behind a veil of ignorance, originating from a natural or original position as proposed by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Marianne and Connell come from different social backgrounds and have different views on politics, morality, and identity. Their relationship ensues as a result of the pre-existing social contract of class divide, both acknowledging they met only because of class differences. Therefore,

they initially shy away from candid expression. They both call each other “. . . the smartest person I know of.” But never to each other’s faces, which could cause a shift in the comfortable power dynamics in their strange relationship. But they eventually succeed in attaining social justice even with the absence of the veil of ignorance. Thus, the text reflects upon the logic of their transactions:

He brought her goodness like a gift, and now it belongs to her. Meanwhile, his life opens out before him in all directions at once. They've done a lot of good for each other. (Rooney 273)

This is where the receiver of the text must determine whether Marianne and Connell have been liberated from the painfulness of pain to move towards its pleasures or if pain and nullity persist for perpetuity in this tale of love and pain intertwined together.

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