Longing Bodies and Suffering Souls: Reassessment of Irish Gender Identities in Sally Rooney's Normal People and Beautiful World, Where Are You

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1. Introduction

1.1 General Introduction

Hailed as "Salinger for the Snapchat generation" (Godwin; 2020) by her editor at Faber and as "the first great millennial novelist" (Barry; 2018) by the New York Times, Sally Rooney's literary debut has been explosively successful and has attracted enormous praise. Sally Rooney's three presently published novels namely *Conversations with Friends* (CWF; 2017), *Normal People* (NP; 2018), and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (BWWAY; 2021) have caused a whirlwind among readers across the globe. Representing an emerging voice of millennial female Irish authors, Sally Rooney's talent and narrative finesse have been internationally recognised and critically acclaimed. Having sold "one million copies in the UK alone" (Doyle; 2024), the young Irish author's popularity has been flourishing to the extent that her first two novels have even been turned into BBC Three drama series, with *Normal People* (2020) being the most-streamed drama in 2020 having been watched 62.7 million times and being ranked at 91% on Rotten Tomatoes (Chilton; 2020). Even though Rooney writes in an Irish context, the Sally Rooney phenomenon has been welcomed on bookshelves and screens of many generations and countries having most strongly resonated with younger generations, like Rooney herself, whose experiences, pains, and traumas she aims to bring to public attention. Indeed, Rooney's fiction is permeated with socioeconomic and political factors that dictate her characters' behavioural codes leaving them to suffer from self-erasure and harmful identity fragmentation.

In a world consumed by coldness and individualised global commercialisation, Rooney's novels have found many eager eyes. In terms of awards, her novel *Normal People* was longlisted for the Booker Prize in 2018 (Cain; 2018), which made Rooney at twenty-seven years old the youngest nominated author in that year, a major achievement in her career. Rooney also won The Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Prize followed by the Irish Book Award, with her novel *Normal People* being chosen Novel of the Year (Faber & Faber; 2021). That same novel's major success was also illuminated by Rooney's win of the Costa Book Award in the same year and the Encore Award a year later (Faber & Faber; 2021). In addition, Rooney's script for the series *Normal People* (2020) won an Irish Film and Television award for the best script and was even nominated for an Emmy for skilful script writing (Faber & Faber; 2021). Her novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) also won Novel of the Year during the Dalkey Literary Awards (Kelleher; 2022). Finally, "Sally Rooney has won several awards at the Nielsen Book Data Bestseller Awards […], honoring authors whose books have now sold more

than 250,000 (silver), 500,000 (gold) and one million copies (platinum)" (Doyle; 2024). It becomes safe to say that all of Rooney's awards and nominations testify to an enormous societal need to voice previously hidden pains harming gendered bodies and souls in contemporary Ireland.

It can clearly be observed that most characters produced by Rooney are suffering from mental breakdowns and fits, are unable to develop a healthy self-identity, and are "surrounded by a halo of (ab)normality that makes the pain even harder to witness" (Muro; 103). This explicit and raw depiction of self-discovery and painful experience of oneself and the surrounding world can be explained by Rooney's aim to give a voice to the contemporary Irish millennial experience. The voice of the millennial generation mirrors their perception of the world in which they grew up and find themselves sinking and at a loss while calling for a change in societal order and more freedom of self-realisation. Having witnessed two economic crises, namely the decade of the 1980s and the post-Celtic Tiger Period, in which the Irish banking sector entered a severe recession after the economic Celtic Tiger phenomenon (mid-1990s to 2008) suffered from a dramatic burst, Millennials were trapped in an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness and "alienation you could cut with a knife" (Connell 2005; 96). As the Irish economy was left in shreds after a period of bloom, Irish youth found themselves trapped in poverty, a housing crisis, and no viable work prospects. Through her characters' personal, relatable lived experiences Rooney laments that the world they are surrounded by "has slowly but perceptibly become an uglier place [in which one feels] "adrift from the world of ideas, alienated [and] with no intellectual home" (BWWAY; 208). This sense of rootlessness and lack of home and purpose permeates her novels and young adult characters' minds.

Indeed, Rooney's novels and characters are partially based on her own contemporary experience of gender issues in Ireland in uncertain times. The Irish author and screenwriter born in 1991 in Castlebar, Country Mayo, has been passionate about literature and self-expression from a very young age (Ingle; 2021). Having attended a Catholic school (Scally; 2021), which taught a repressive dogma of sexual morality, Rooney's novels openly, vulnerably, and with a touching intimacy allow the reader to peek behind closed doors and experience the destructive and healing powers of human sexuality. Romantic relationships and human interconnectedness are presented as possible healing vehicles in neoliberal societies driven by soulless consumption and pervaded by a "sense of voyeurism, alienation, and detachment" (Darling 2021; 543). From a very young age, Rooney expressed her thoughts in writing and has written poems, essays, and even an unpublished novel at the age of fifteen before her major success (Ingle; 2021). Rooney studied English Literature at Trinity College and was a successful member of the University

debate team earning her the title of the Best Competitive Debater in Europe at twenty-two years old (Seo; 2022).

Being vocal about societal injustices remains a major concern for the novelist who has claimed to have adopted Marxist belief systems (Wilson; 2021), which criticise class and gender inequalities as products of global capitalism, the output of which remains an enormous discrepancy between wealth and precarity. Rooney's skilful feminist critique of heteropatriarchal oppression, alienation and fragmentation of the gendered self, the commodification of the female body, negotiations of power and control, and suffocating policing of gender expression by society and the self is voiced boldly and uncompromisingly in her novels calling for unity, interhuman support, and major change. This thesis stands to argue that Rooney's novels express societal criticism of gender norms and convey a deeply political message, as Rooney's gendered characters' displays of psychological illnesses are represented as stemming from societal inequalities and pressures in the novels. Also, I am going to show that Rooney's use of derogatory adjectives and critical narrative voice aims to bring across her denouncement of flawed intuitional structures and deconstruction of harmful gender norms. Indeed, as Rooney is part of an "active, critical, politically informed literary generation [which] question[s] the viability of current systems of power" (Darling 2021; 550), her novels are "concerned with what fiction can *do* to address the socio-political and economic organisation of the historical present" (Darling 2023b; 357). Thus, "[her characters'] difficulty [to] adapt to [societal norms] becomes a figurative critique of the established, hegemonic masculinity [in] Ireland" (Bollos, 2022; 54).

1.2 Historical Context

It is well-known that Ireland was westernised quite late "with Western and continental European liberal views only recently flooding in with the normalisation and expansion of technology" (Tobin; 262). Forcing men and women to subscribe to restrictive patriarchal gender norms in the post-revolutionary Irish Free State (1922-1937) and later on continuing the repression in the Irish Republic governed by De Valera, one cannot deny the "deep and rapid change that transformed Irish society after about 1970" (Coughlan; 175). Haunted by oppressive Catholic morality standards Ireland's constitution deeply restricted women's and homosexuals' rights during the 20th century, while demonising divorce and maternity out of wedlock. Indeed, "a [n]ear-universal adherence to a particularly authoritarian and quasi-Jansenist Catholicism was a further factor in restricting [Irish people's] rights and establishing coercive arrangements of gender roles and relations. These effectively held both genders under

the unquestioned hegemony […] in which women played only muted and ancillary roles" (Coughlan; 175). It becomes clear that the Catholic doctrine of purity and heterosexuality in the Republic of Ireland dominated the Irish public and private sphere while actively restricting the freedom of choice and interpersonal relationships of the people. Holding a firm power grip over Ireland for centuries "the [church's] sexual repressions, in-turned emotional culture, and misogynist containment of feminine sexuality" (Coughlan; 176) have caused deep intergenerational wounds.

Also, the strict refusal of the church to accept alternative and non-conforming ways of family structures often resulted in harsh punishments such as forced adoption for babies of young, unmarried mothers and penal labor for homosexuals. It is important to note that previously unknown freedoms were introduced by the secularisation of the Irish Constitution in 1972, which loosened the restrictive view on premarital sex and single motherhood. Additionally, the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the legalisation of the sale and advertisement of contraceptives in 1993, the legalisation of divorce in 1995, and finally the legalisation of abortion in 2018 can be seen as major social achievements.

While those major feminist goals have officially been reached, literary scholar Maria Amor Barros-Del Río observes in her article "Sally Rooney's Normal People: The Millennial Novel of Formation in Recessionary Ireland" that "[i]n neoliberal economies, Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland included, economic contraction resulted in repolarisation of class and gender, both in discourse and representation, with a marked regressive orientation" (177). Indeed, as scholar Debbie Ging points out "the growing prevalence of essentialist or bio-determinist accounts of gender difference" (54) in contemporary Irish media images and advertisements have become a major concern, as gender stereotyping, objectifying and sexualising images of "largebreasted, pouting babes in hotpants […] and emotionally challenged hard men hell-bent on the adolescent pleasures of 'Lad-land' (cars, soccer, beer, gangsters and pornography)" (53) dictate restrictive and unrealistic gender images.

Thus, it becomes clear that contemporary societies are in no way liberated from rigid, objectifying, and harmful gender norms but simply have found more covert and subtle ways of portraying them as desirable while subjugating the Irish population to a forced reproduction of normative gender ideals. The harm brought about by a socially policed performance of the gendered body and Rooney's skilful denouncement and reassessment of the latter will come to light during my further analysis.

This thesis focuses on Sally Rooney's last two novels, *Normal People* (2018), a Bildungsroman focusing on Marianne and Connell's love story, and *Beautiful World, Where are You* (2021), a novel partially written in epistolary style following the developing relationships between Eileen, Alice, Simon, and Felix. While at first glance easily reduced to simplistic teenage love stories, the novels reveal bleeding wounds and various social ills infecting the characters whose story Rooney tells. Using critical and analytical lenses of gender and the self is essential to analyse how Rooney's feminist voice surfaces in the novels, while crudely and rawly depicting the wounds and voice of a generation forced to dissociate from their true selves. The structure of this thesis divides it into two main chapters with the chapter on masculinity purposefully preceding the one on femininity in order to emphasise the centuries of patriarchal abuse that preceded feminist change and inflicted major harm on the feminine self while creating an artificial dichotomy and a binary opposition between men and women.

The first chapter titled "Rooney's Reassessment of Contemporary Irish Masculinities" is subdivided into three subchapters analysing the harmful consequences of imposed gender norms on Irish men's lives and selves. I will stand to argue that gender-based control is diffused by social institutions as much as by friends and family members who engage in self-policing while also actively policing others to uphold the oppressive patriarchal system.

The second chapter of this thesis titled "Rooney's Vulnerable Femininities" aims to showcase Rooney's depiction of the deep-rooted cultural abuse imposed on women. While Rooney's last novel has been accused of reinforcing gendered roles for Millennials (Barros-Del Río 2022a; 54), this chapter aims to show that Rooney's women's practical passivity and questionable choices aim to portray the perverted ways of how harmful masculinity still controls and pervades contemporary Irish women's lives leaving submissive heteronormative relationships as the only way left to find possible happiness within restrictive circumstances.

Debunking the popular myth of post-feminism, a movement whose "defining feature […] is the widespread acceptance of the myth that gender equality has been won, in spite of the fact that Irish women continue to be underrepresented in politics, industry and the professions, and continue to earn less than men" (Ging; 58), Rooney's novels demonstrate that patriarchal abuse still deeply permeates Irish layers of society. I will analyse how Rooney critiques neoliberalism's disregard of patriarchal oppression by highlighting that feminist goals of women's equal rights have not yet been won, as it can be observed that women are still exposed to direct and structural violence at the hands of men. For reasons of clarification, this thesis

uses Erik Carlquist's and Joshua Phelp's definition of neoliberalism expressed in the *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* when referring to the concept of neoliberalism, which goes as follows:

> Neoliberalism is a pervasive and increasingly global ideology, associated with the favouring of free-market competition and private property rights, reduction or abolishment of government intervention and expenditure, and valuation of individual "freedom of choice (1231).

In terms of the working methodology of my thesis, I will adopt a critical focus on Raewyn Connell's Hegemonic Masculinity Theory (1995) in order to produce an in-depth analysis of oppressive societal structures and the suffering and identity fragmentation they inflict to Rooney's characters. Also, a critical literary analysis which uses Judith Butler's performativity theory, which dissects the forced social performance of the gendered self is essential to show how the novels successfully deconstruct and redefine gender identities, highlighting their fluidity and granting stifled voices a right to be heard. While my secondary sources are an indispensable part of my analysis, a greater focus will lie on a detailed reading of my primary sources and thorough character analysis. For my first chapter on masculinity, I will in detail read Simon's, Connell's and Felix's failed attempts to adhere to strict and polarised masculine conduct codes. Thus, it will become clear how through her male characters Rooney underlines the severe consequences patriarchal norms have on male mental health. My second chapter, which analyses femininity as culturally constructed, will also focus on a critical and analytical approach to gender while relying on a detailed reading of the novels. I will in detail look at the characters of Marianne, Alice and Eileen and reveal that even though at first glance they invoke the impression of liberated modern women, they are in truth deeply imprisoned and victimised by patriarchal oppressive norms, which lead them to engage in sexual and emotional relationships and practices detrimental to their selves.

Both theories support my argument that Rooney shows how rigid adherence to societal scripts in order to avoid punishment creates harmful and abusive forms of masculinity and enforces the subjugation of women. For Raewyn Connell's theory, I am going to use the reworked version of her monograph *Masculinities* (2005), her article "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept" (2005) in collaboration with James W. Messerschmidt, and finally a recent article titled "Masculinities in Global Perspective: Hegemony, Contestation, and Changing Structures of Power" (2016) focusing on modern-day hegemony and its growing prominence in neoliberal societies. By showcasing how homosocial and tender relationships

between men are rendered impossible by hegemonic masculinity, which can be defined as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (Connell 2005; 77), it becomes clear that nurturing and caring qualities in men are branded as effeminate and containing homosexual tendencies. My analysis is going to focus on how influenced by the fear of punishment Rooney's male characters try to embody normative, hegemonic and "currently most honored way[s] of being [men] (Connell, Messerschmidt; 832). However, while men are undeniably also affected by societal oppression, Connell claims that in a patriarchal society, men gain a patriarchal dividend, which she defines as "the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women" (Connell 2005; 79). It will come to light that the patriarchal dividend in Rooney's novels grants men "honor, prestige, and the right to command" (Connell 2005; 82) and allows them to get away with and even be praised for abuse, while women are shamed, and victim blamed as will be seen in the analysis of Marianne and Jamie's relationship (NP; 230). All in all, it will become clear that Rooney shows how hegemonic masculinity structures permeate liberal economies, oppress, and objectify women and force men into isolation, as they are denied meaningful bonds and must compete with each other for a facade of dominance.

Butler's performativity theory is also of major relevance when analysing gender as a societal construct which forces Rooney's gendered characters to enact societally normative expectations of their gender. Making use of Butler's monograph *Bodies that Matter* (1993) and her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* (1988) in order to support Rooney's depiction of gender as forcefully and externally imposed on the body, Butler's argument stands that "gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (Butler 1988; 520). As Butler claims that the body's acts are determined by biological markers and that the objectification of the female and male body under the patriarchal gaze becomes undeniable, the restrictions imposed on gendered subjects come to light. Thus, "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed [but] rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts" (Butler 1988; 519).

Finally, my analysis will underline how Rooney showcases the harmful consequences of the constructed nature of gender and the rigid imposition of their adherence, such as mental health struggles and self-hatred when faced with the inability to perform. This is most prominently shown by Connell's depression, Felix and Alice's disconnectedness and

dissociation from the world around them, and finally Eileen and Marianne's active self-hatred and self-harm.

When it comes to critical literature written on Rooney's critique of gender, Irish society and family life and the contemporary Irish post-crash experience, many useful sources can be named. While some of those works grant insightful historical information on wounds of generational silencing and oppression and the power and control exercised by the Catholic heteropatriarchy, others give more recent insights into the Irish economy of gender and offer in-depth analysis of Rooney's works.

On the one hand, when it comes to masculinity analysis, in his monograph *Contemporary Irish Masculinities: Male Homosociality in Sally Rooney's Novels*, Angelos Bollos successfully uses Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory in order to showcase how the patriarchy oppresses the masculine self and hinders meaningful relationships among men in Rooney's novels. On the other hand, when looking at traumatised femininities and the erasure of the female self, Armie Madalina and Verónica Membrive's chapter "Introduction" in monograph *Wounds of the Body and Soul: Trauma, Memory and Silence of the Irish Women in Contemporary Literature* should be consulted, as it provides a thorough overview of vulnerable Irish womanhood. In her articles "'It Was Our Great Generational Decision': Capitalism, the Internet and Depersonalisation in Some Millennial Irish Women's Writing" and ""There are worse things than getting beaten up": Neoliberal Violence in *Normal People*", Darling Orlaith also discusses topics essential for my analysis, as she analyses Irish millennial women's perception of the world and denounces neoliberal violence imposed on victimised women. Additionally, the article "Gender, Sexuality and the Ideology of the Family in Ireland" (2018) by Carregal Romero exposes the harm of dysfunctional, toxic, and abusive family units in perpetuating generational trauma and enforcing heteropatriarchal gender norms.

While these scholarly sources undeniably complete and inform the topic of my analysis, an approach to Rooney's novels using a combination of Butler's performativity theory and Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory, which highlight Rooney's critique of restrictive gender norms is of yet still missing in academic research. Applying the aforementioned theories together to analyse Rooney's dissection of toxic Irish gender standards, this thesis is going to fill in the current gap in scholarly literature when it comes to analysing gender structures and enactments in Rooney's last two novels through this particular approach. Lastly, this thesis' claim for relevance stems from the striking need to actively discuss Rooney's novels as they voice relevant issues of gendered oppression, mechanisms which still cause major concern

today. It remains an important task to broaden academic research on Rooney's work on gender in Ireland using various combinations of theories and approaches, as "knowledge and theoretical insight are priceless assets for action when action is concerned with contesting power and achieving social justice" (Connell, Messerschmidt; 315).

All in all, this thesis sheds light on societally and culturally constructed gender definitions, which control Rooney's gendered characters' life circumstances. Through the explicit suffering of her characters and their excruciating explorations of human sexuality, interpersonal relationships, and the cutthroat economic climate surrounding them, Rooney's fiction mirrors the millennial experience of a voided perception of the world. In her novels "[j]ob insecurity, exorbitant rents, instant messaging, and casual sex coexist with different forms of physical violence, conflictive family relationships, a strong sense of not belonging, class and privilege" (Barros-Del Río 2022c; 178). The main body of this thesis, which follows this introduction, will meticulously debunk essentialist ideas about gender and gender-based behaviour while following Judith Butler's claim that gender is an oppressive construct used to exercise control ever presently plaguing contemporary Irish society.

2. Rooney's Reassessment of Contemporary Irish Masculinities

2.1 The Male Self and Society

Sally Rooney, just like other "Irish authors […] us[es] [her] art to engage with questions about political agency and identity" (Barros-Del Río 2022c, 177) while strongly denouncing harmful and socially constructed gendered behaviour codes. Although at first glance it may appear that Rooney's novels mostly focus on women's oppressed condition in Irish society, a closer look at Irish men's experiences and circumstances reveals that while being the main perpetrators of violence, their lives are also strongly controlled by rigid norms of masculinity expression. This subchapter aims to analyse three aspects of how the male self expresses itself in Rooney's novels, namely forced assertion of the self through aggression towards other men, violence against women, and sexual conquest can be identified as ways of conforming to dominant hegemonic masculinity norms. As "hegemonic masculinity [cannot be] assumed to be normal in the statistical sense [because] only a minority of men might enact it" (Connell, Messerschmidt; 832) it will become clear that the constant exposure of the male self to external judgement leads to harmful behaviour patterns.

The first aspect that will be analysed in this chapter is the assertion of the male self through aggression against other men. Since essentialist views of masculinity discourage men

from showing a soft and caring side and brandmark men who refuse to abide by these rules as "unmanly, weak, subservient" (Redmond; 136), men are pushed to present themselves as "rejecting emotion and engaging in exaggerated performances of aggression and bravado" (Ging; 62). In *Normal People,* Rooney critiques that instead of encouraging healthy communication between men, a "society […] teeming with systemic, symbolic and subjective violence" (Darling 2023b, 20) obliges the male self to prove its worth by competing with other men for dominance using physical violence:

> For several months when he first saw [Marianne and Jamie] together, Connell had compulsive fantasies about kicking Jamie in the head until his skull was the texture of a wet newspaper […] Once, after speaking to Jamie briefly at a party, Connell had left the building and punched a brick wall so hard his hand started bleeding (NP; 163).

While Connell dislikes Jamie due to the physical violence he inflicts on Marianne, he is also unable "to reconcile himself to the idea of losing his hold over her, like a key to an empty property, left available for future use" (NP; 248). Feeling weakened in his masculinity, Connell's response to the emotions he is experiencing is aggression, as he has internalised that "aggressive, physical masculinity [is] the most powerful identity for men" (Redmond; 132).

Also, Connell, a working-class man, feels inferior to Jamie due to his influence and wealth, which support his claim for power and authority, and thus wants to use his advantage of being athletic and physically strong in order to undermine Jamie's social standing. Rooney's critical narrative voice and explicit depictions of physical violence and "strict sex-role stereotyping" (Ging; 6) showcase how Irish society brutalises men by painting violence as an acceptable means of conflict resolution. Indeed, Judith Butler notes that "systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices" (Butler 1988; 522). It becomes evident that the male self's self-expression through aggression towards its male peers originates from structural violence imposed by toxic societal norms of invulnerability and hostility. As Connell does not physically attack Jamie, but only fantasises to do so, he inflicts self-harm upon himself in order to relieve himself of his negative emotions which he is unable to conceal. Thus, Rooney brings to light the harmful results of aggression towards others and the self provoked by the harsh imposition of societal gender constructs.

Lastly, while it can be observed that Connell's thoughts of violence against other men are mostly directed towards Marianne's oppressors, "Connell's regaining of power [is also empathised] by his protection of Marianne from Alan's abuse" (Yang 9):

> Connell walks towards Alan until Alan is standing with his back against the banister. […] Connell's face is wet with perspiration. […] If you ever touch Marianne again, I'll kill you, [Connell] says. […] I'll come back here myself and kill you, that's it (NP; 252).

Hence, Connell's "successful claim to authority […] that is the mark of hegemony [is underpinned] through violence" (Connell 2005; 77), while his aggression is exemplified by the brutality of the verb "to kill". By defeating Marianne's oppressive brother, Connell establishes himself as the dominant masculine figure reclaiming his authority, although softer but still present, over Marianne's female self. Since "[t]he most validated forms of masculinity are often the most powerful and the most rewarded" (Redmond; 132), Connell's possessive and protective masculinity supported by violence in the name of justice grants him a socially dominant standing while simultaneously pressuring him to defend his authority out of fear of ostracisation.

When it comes to the second aspect of male self-expression, this thesis identifies Rooney's men's need to conquer women and reduce them to subordinate positions. Given Raewyn Connell's statement that "a hegemonic version [of masculinity] at the top of the hierarchy [is] connected to the subordination of women […] [and] name[s] a key mechanism sustaining an oppressive society" (Connell 2016; 303), the novels demonstrate how sexual conquest and the subordination of women become essential factors for men in proving their strength and potency. Indeed, as "traditional concepts of manliness based [on] […] dominant, reproductive sexuality" (Madden; 70) can be seen as still deeply pervasive in Irish society, Rooney shows by the example of Felix's sexual patterns how young men feel the need to validate societal expectations by reducing women to sexual trophies:

> About a year ago I brought some girl home after a night out, out then I found out later she was still in school. Sixteen or seventeen, I think she was. Did she look older? […] [I] didn't think about it (BWWAY; 122).

This passage exemplifies Felix's dissociation and emotional detachment, as he does not concern himself with the girl's age or personality and merely views her body as a means to achieve sexual satisfaction and a higher social standing. It can be observed that this predatorial behaviour results from a fear of societal punishment when being too emotionally intimate with women, as ironically "[t]he patriarchal order prohibits forms of emotion, attachment and pleasure that patriarchal society itself produces" (Connell 2005; 85). As the patriarchal order classifies emotional men as effeminate, men often do not allow themselves to be compassionate and caring towards women out of fear of finding themselves in a subordinate position. Indeed,

Angelos Bollos explains that "hostile behaviour that men […] adopt, and witness, toward women and girls, do not result from a personal need to inflict psychological pain on to them; rather, they appear as performative markers of adherence to homosocial codes of behaviour" (Bollos 2024; 29). It becomes clear that hurtful male behaviour towards women is a result of societal pressures imposed on men.

Also, Rooney exemplifies that men try to elevate their status and success by surrounding themselves with women they consider to be inferior and in need of salvation, as can be seen by her descriptions of Simon Costigan's romantic relationships. Through Alice, Rooney comments the following:

> [Simon] goes around making friends with unstable people just so he can feel good about himself. Especially women, especially younger women. And if they have no money that's even better (BWWAY; 314).

Indeed, it becomes evident that Simon's male self is deeply dependent on defining its value by patronising young, vulnerable women. Feeling trapped and unable to express his true self freely due to societal restrictions, he asserts his superiority over weaker societal groups in order to show off his power and soothe his feelings of lack and distress.

Felix also does not fit into societal standards of masculinity due to his low financial standing and bisexuality. Since his possibilities in the male community are limited, he numbs his pain by smoking weed (BWWAY; 166) and uses his "gender bonus for "maleness"" (O'Connor 85) in order to oppress Alice, who threatens him with her expressive personality and success. When discovering that Alice has a Wikipedia page, instead of supporting her, he makes it a point to degrade her by stating that "[she] probably wrote it [her]self" (BWWAY; 48). Additionally, another instance in the novel proves that Felix prefers to see Alice in the role of a submissive wife confined to the sphere of the home while he enjoys the freedoms of the outside world. In a text message, he states:

> Felix: Well you can send me a love letter on here while I'm out getting locked […] And ill read it when I get home (BWWAY; 217).

It can be observed that Felix devalues Alice's worth as a human being and addresses her in a derogatory way. Representing himself as free of obligations, Felix is getting drunk at a nightclub and potentially enjoys the company of other women while he expects Alice to wait for him at home ready to please him when he returns. It becomes clear that while Alice is an economically independent woman, Felix aims to establish an order in their relationship in which

he clearly dominates, and she is forced to fill a submissive role. As Felix is financially weaker than Alice "the conventional role by which men must pay or invite women is inverted in [their] relationship, and this is […] what triggers [Felix's] discomfort in his relationship with [Alice]" (Alfarez Mendia; 157). Thus, Rooney critiques a society that still expects women to submit their sense of self in favour of the patriarchal order, while also underlining the precarious position of men who face societal punishment if they refuse to obey.

When looking at the third and last aspect of male self-expression, it is important to state that the male self is denied autonomous choices as it is exposed, "surfaced [,] [and] open to the perception of others" (Butler 1988; 520), while also forced to actively "perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions" (Butler 1988; 522) and seek exterior validation. Hindered from harmoniously connecting and merging his body and self, Connell can be seen as utterly exposed to external opinions:

> [H]is personality seemed like something external to himself, managed by opinions of others, rather than anything he individually did or produced. […] [H]e has a sense of invisibility, nothingness, with no reputation to recommend him to anyone (NP; 70).

Here, Connell embodies the disconnectedness and aloofness of the millennial generation with themselves and the outside world. While neoliberalism places importance on individual opportunity, it undeniably disregards societal inequalities while representing the marginalised subject as lacking. Indeed, Barros-Del Río remarks that "[b]ecause contemporary societies are strongly marked by materiality, Connell develops a sense of inferiority that characterises his tendency towards self-exclusion" (Barros-Del Río 2022b, 75). Just like Felix, Connell feels the need to compensate for his inferior social standing, however, instead of harassing women he does so through academic success for instance being able to "provide [the name of a book or author] for [his peers]" (NP; 99). Being "academically gifted" (Bollos 2022; 52) provides Connell with a possibility of upward mobility that Felix does not possess but still does not grant him liberation from hegemonic masculinity standards that are linked to wealth. It becomes clear that the neoliberal ideal of "managerial masculinities […] [which are] competitive and power-oriented (Connell 2016; 311) is inaccessible to lower-class men and hard to achieve in post-crash Ireland, while it still pushes individual blame for failure on the gendered subjects. Hence, the excessive pressure of "strongly gendered practices aligned with neoliberal ideologies […] translate into male anxiety" (Barros-Del Río 2022b; 78) and result in the erasure of Rooney's men's selves and the "profound [alienat[ion] from [their] own bodies" (NP; 204).

This can be observed in Connell's detachment from his body and self when eating alone at university (NP; 204) making him an outcast, as his masculinity performance does not align with wealthy urban masculinities. This lack of harmony between the body and self can also be observed in Felix's life, as he cannot reconcile the fact that he uses the same body for doing manual labor, an expression of masculine strength, and touching Alice, which is an act of intimacy (BWWAY; 223). Therefore, the inability of consciously accepting and working though one's emotional and mental state translates also into a detachment from the body, which shows the body' and mind's interconnectedness.

Rooney also denounces how the male self is restricted in its life choices by its own family, which polices it into the idea of living up to societal constructs of masculine ideals. Indeed, perpetuated within the family, these rigid norms "find social legitimacy and become "natural" and "self-evident" facts of life" (Carregal Romero; 80) and alienate men from their true selves, as can be seen in Simon's case:

> I suppose [my mother] has friends whose children are the same age as I am, and they're all doctors or lawyers now and they have children of their own. And I am basically a parliamentary assistant with no girlfriend. I mean, I don't blame my mother for being confused. I don't know what happened to my life either (BWWAY; 309).

Indeed, being thirty-five years old, Simon is judged by his family for being childless and unmarried and not holding a job they consider respectable. Being under pressure to live up to the idea of respectability, which is being "diligent, patriotic, prioritising family, focus[ing] on community, and holding strong moral values" (Bollos 2024; 57), Simon confides in Felix that he is unable to live up to his family's expectations. However, in this excerpt Rooney clearly depicts his internalisation of self-blame, as he views himself as deficient and "developmentally impaired" (NP; 5) instead of questioning the society surrounding him. Thus, Rooney denounces the untouchability and persistence of harmful gender norms and highlights the importance of freedom of self-expression.

2.2 Emotional Repression and Men's Mental Health

Rooney's novels grant extensive attention to the psychological suffering of Irish men brought about by rigid and stoic visions of what is deemed to be a respectable way to behave. This subchapter analyses the detrimental consequences of emotional repression imposed upon the male self, as it becomes clear that "cultural and sociological explanations, which see excessive discipline and the repression of emotion as the problem, have been eclipsed by biological essentialist and individualising frameworks, which function to justify stricter

disciplinary measures" (Ging; 62). Therefore, my analysis underlines how Rooney unveils that forcing men into restrictive frameworks can lead to emotional breakdowns, unpunished sexual violence and even suicide.

At first, it is essential to focus on the societal discrediting of male victims of sexual harassment and violence, as patriarchal codes do not recognise the fact that men can be abused and degraded by predatorial women. The idea that when a woman initiates sexual contact a man's consent is falsely assumed can be observed in the scene of sexual assault to which Connell is subjected by his high school teacher Paula Neary:

> [Mrs. Neary] started unbuttoning [Connell's] jeans. In a panic he tried to push her hand away, but with such an ineffectual gesture that she appeared to think he was helping her. She got the top button undone and he told her that he was really drunk, and maybe they should stop. She put her hand inside the waistband of his underwear and said it was okay, she didn't mind (NP; 130).

The scene depicts how an adult female authority crosses her male student's boundaries and assaults him by ignoring his lack of consent. However, this shocking attempt of rape remains unpunished by law, as the victim, Connell, is conditioned to suffocate and devalue his own feelings and is confronted with a lack of compassion and recognition of his hurt by his surroundings. While "[n]onconsensual sex has [always] been an issue for Irish society" (Bollos 2022; 53), sexual violence suffered by men is branded as even more shameful and is most of the time concealed from the public eye. In fact, Barros-Del Río rightfully notices that "[s]ilence plays a major role to stress the loneliness and isolation of the [male] protagonists in contemporary Ireland" (Barros-Del Río 2022b; 76). Scholar Angelos Bollos also critiques emotional repression as "a site for learned gendered behaviour and a site of struggle where men, and particularly young boys, are tasked with concealing their vulnerabilities, needs for emotional expression and, in turn, their authentic selves" (Bollos 2024; 2).

Following the assault, Connell does not dare to confide in his male friends out of fear that "they'll think he's trying to brag about it" (NP; 4) and dismisses the incident as him "being dramatic" (NP; 140) and his teacher not doing "anything that bad" (NP; 140). The fact that he is only able to admit to Marianne, a woman, that "[he] feel[s] fucked-up about it" (NP; 140) shows the lack of understanding and support in male communities. Thus, "Connell's struggles with his mental health [after the assault] symbolise the need for men to release themselves from societal expectations" (Bollos 2022; 54).

Additionally, Rob's suicide and the inability to process his grief in a healthy manner strongly affect Connell's mental health and lead to intense psychological breakdowns provoked by years of emotional repression forbidding feelings of tenderness and intimacy. Gradually after Connell finds out that "Rob's body was recovered from the river Corrib" (NP; 205) his mental health begins to deteriorate:

> His anxiety, which was previously chronic and low-level, serving as a kind of all-purpose inhibiting impulse, has become severe. His hands start tingling when he has to perform minor interactions [...]. Once or twice he's had major panic attacks: hyperventilation, chest pain, pins, and needles all over his body (NP; 206).

These psychosomatic symptoms of disease underpin Rooney's narrative of the interconnectedness of the body and the mind which suffer equally when one part is infected. Rooney here focuses on the physical expression of psychological trauma experienced by Connell's gendered body which is intensified by her use of the adjective "severe". Hence, it can be observed that "hegemonic masculinity [...] not only limits but also directs men away from any possible attempts to develop an emotional reserve that can help them cope with life" (Bollos 2024; 46). This passage also demonstrates how Rooney skilfully grants Connell's trauma legitimisation through his bodily reactions. Even though its voice of protest is suppressed, the gendered body, whose freedom is restricted by its biological sex, rebels against harmful ideas of masculinity and fails to perform its gender-ascribed role of strength. Thus, by depicting advanced symptoms of mental health-related anxieties and their corporeal projections Rooney calls out the harm stemming from "expectations related to establishing and confirming one's masculinity [which are] suffocating young men" (Bollos 2022; 54).

Subsequently, when looking at the most severe case of desperation and suffering brought about by the Irish current gender and economic order in Rooney's novels, it is relevant to take a look at the reasons piling up to Rob's decision to end his life as "societal pressure breaks him" (Bollos 2022; 56). Rooney depicts the Irish school environment as a suffocating and controlling space forcing young men to become increasingly desensitised:

> Nothing had meant more to Rob than the approval of others; to be thought well of, to be a person of status. He would have betrayed any confidence, any kindness, for the promise of social acceptance. [...] [The boys'] feelings were suppressed so carefully in everyday life, forced into smaller and smaller spaces [...]. It was [only] permissible to touch each other and cry during football matches (NP; 212).

In this relevant passage, Rooney shows that men who are pressured to live up to "traditional masculine values of stoicism, strength, and personal and social restraint" (Darcy; 22) find

themselves at the mercy of social approval and are obstructed from expressing their emotions outside of manly activities such as sports. Thus, "male characters often exhibit symptoms of depression, which can be attributed to the societal pressures they face" (Yang; 8) and are willing to harm others in order to save themselves from ostracisation.

In addition to harsh gender norms restricting and shaping his self in an artificial way, Rob also feels robbed of a future in which he can establish a career, which would place him on a higher echelon of society, and thus he feels trapped in an existence of inferiority. "Coming of age in a time marked by hopelessness and despair, Rob is a body sacrificed to political economy [as] he is part of a generation for whom the Celtic Tiger trend of upward social mobility enjoyed by his parents was unceremoniously reversed" (Darling 2023b; 23-24). The fact that "Rob had been drinking a lot in the preceding weeks and seemed out of sorts" (NP; 205) goes to show that just like Felix, Rob tries to numb his desperation with anesthetics and when finding himself unsuccessful decides to end his suffering. Hence, it comes to light that "neoliberalism has had contradictory effects for masculinity formation [as] [f]or large numbers of men, 'structural adjustment' meant unemployment or casualisation" (Connell 2016; 310), which leads to male mental suffering, as "[t]hese socioeconomic developments threaten men's perceptions of themselves as breadwinners" (O'Connor; 84).

In *Beautiful World, Where Are You* Rooney also follows up on the topic of emotional repression due to the harmful impositions of emotional restraint. Indeed, theorist Judith Butler also notes that "gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions" (Butler 1988; 527). Out of fear of these punishments and regulations in real life, Simon and Felix find themselves confined to restricted emotional spaces which cause them emotional harm. Felix for instance can be seen, just as Connell, unable to work through the death of a loved one while increasingly dissociating himself from reality as a result of his inability to cope with grief. In a conversation with Simon, he confesses to the following:

> I'm avoiding my brother for the last six weeks trying to get out of signing [my mother's house] over. Isn't that mad? I don't know why I'm doing it. It's not like I want to live there. And I really need the money. But that's me, can't do things the easy way (261).

Here, Felix struggles to enact a dominant and rational masculinity, unaffected by feminised feelings of grief can be observed. Rooney's critical narrative voice highlights his pain and it becomes visible that Felix's emotional repression develops against the backdrop of his hostile social climate, as the imposed idea of "[h]egemonic masculinity is culturally linked to both

authority and rationality, key themes in the legitimation of patriarchy" (Connell 2005; 90) and thus forbids displaying one's emotions in order to not threaten the system's validity.

Simon's example also shows that "the negative effects of hegemonic masculinity not only [affect] women and those who do not conform to heteronormative ideals, but also […] men who seemingly benefit from them" (Bollos 2022; 56). His relationship with his physically present but emotionally unavailable father shows that emotional repression is subject to generational reproduction strictly governed by societal norms of emotional restraint and physical vitality. In a conversation with Eileen, Simon recalls how his father polices his expression of masculinity:

> Last time I was home we got into this truly bizarre conflict because I woke up with a headache one morning. […] He can never say he's angry with me himself, he always has to project his feelings onto Geraldine, like it was a personal insult to her that I had a migraine. He has this thing about migraines, because he gets them as well, and he's convinced they're psychosomatic (BWWAY; 149).

In this excerpt the "familiar theme in patriarchal ideology […] that men are rational while women are emotional" (Connell 2005; 165) can be observed. Unable to claim ownership over his own emotions, Simon's father expresses his distress through his wife, as it is acceptable for her as a woman to be upset.

While he engages in social policing when it comes to his son's gender performance, the latter can also be a concealed attempt to protect his son from social sanctions. Scholar Niall Hanlon observes that in Irish society "[t]he father [is seen as] the protector, provider, disciplinarian and moral educator but it [is often] considered unmanly for a father to be overly concerned about a child's welfare" (Hanlon; 45). Thus, while Simon's father might mean well, "[o]bserving his father suppressing and/or avoiding showing his emotions [has] affected the way Simon handles his own emotional state and, by extension, his emotional and mental well-being" (Bollos 2024; 55). Concludingly, it becomes evident that Simon's father tries to eradicate the weaknesses he sees in himself in his son while not realising that this makes his son "fucking hate his life" (BWWAY; 294). Altogether, it becomes clear that gender-based surveillance occurs within families just as much as institutions and infects all generational layers of gendered subjects in Rooney's novels.

Finally, while placing her characters in a morally corrupted and controlling system, Rooney grants a glimpse of hope by portraying small personal choices of rebellion against strictly established gender performance. Judith Butler also points out that "reified and naturalised conceptions of gender might be understood as constituted and, hence, capable of

being constituted differently" (Butler 1988; 520). This vision of potential change can be observed in the scene of Felix's choice to use a make-up product that is traditionally considered feminine and is used by Rooney as her voice of rebellion:

> Felix sat down on the end of the bed, watching Eileen put on make-up. […] Brandishing a small plastic wand, Eileen met Felix's eyes in the mirror and said: Would you like some? […] What is it, mascara? He said. Go on, why not (BWWAY; 285).

This powerful scene installs a vision of the possibility of bodily autonomy and personal choice that men can use to break out of cultural restraints. Rooney highlights the "need for forms of expression, emotion, and physicality foreclosed by traditional masculinities, not only rejecting (or at least destabilising) hegemonic gender norms but perhaps also offering important cultural formulations of emergent male identities" (Madden; 73). Overall, while the societal situation of Irish gendered bodies remains marginal, in *Beautiful World, Where are You* Rooney shows the relevance of personal involvement when it comes to dismantling stereotypes and granting men the option to discover their real feelings and selves.

2.3 (Im)possible Homosociality

When it comes to interactions and interpersonal relationships between boys and men, Rooney's novels mostly provide utterly distanced and problematic depictions. This last part of my chapter on Rooney's masculinities aims to show how Rooney critiques the almost utter impossibility of men to engage in meaningful relationships with each other. Following the goal of denoting harmful societal patterns that pitch men against each other, I am going to focus on three types of relationships, namely between fathers and sons, brothers and male friends in order to underline how "men hinder their own potential for homosociality by repressing admiration, participating in trivial relationships, and resorting to public displays of belittlement" (Bollos 2024; 5).

For the first relationship type, it is important to look at the lack of intimacy and connection between fathers and sons on which I have shortly drawn in the chapter above. It can be observed that Rooney does not grant any positive depictions of caring and involved fatherhood while making father figures appear irrelevant and marginal or even actively harming their children physically or psychologically, while at the same time setting an example of behaviour for them. Connell, who himself is fatherless, observes his friends' perceptions of fathers:

> On nights out his friends sometimes raise the subject of his father, like it's something deep and meaningful they can only talk about when they're drunk. […] [Connell's]

friends seem so obsessed with their own fathers, obsessed with emulating them or being different from them in specific ways. When they fight with their fathers, the fights always seem to mean one thing on the surface but conceal another secret meaning beneath (NP; 46).

In this scene, Rooney denounces the deep emotional wound present in relationships between fathers and sons, which is underlined by the sons' inability to talk about their fathers when they are sober. Hiding behind alcohol, as it temporarily relieves them from the pressure to hide their feelings, Connell's friends express the need to talk and negotiate healthier dynamics in father-son relationships. Also, as the father is in most cases the first and most important example of masculinity enactment, Rooney brings to light the deep responsibility of setting a decent example for young boys. Indeed, the importance of improvement in father-son relationships is of major relevance in establishing a kinder idea of masculinity, as "[t]he transformation of social relations becomes a matter […] of transforming hegemonic social conditions" (Butler 1988; 525) and thus may bring about change.

While I have established that in Rooney's novels relationships between fathers and sons generally "lack […] emotional fluency" (Bollos 2024; 7), Simon's relationship with his father can be seen as straight away harmful and toxic, as it creates, as seen beforehand, a forced order of emotional repression. Through Eileen, Rooney comments that as feelings of resentment, anger and jealousy are not allowed to be shown and open communication appears to be impossible, Simon's father contributes to the erasure of his son's self:

Well, you're young and handsome, [Eileen] said. And women love you. Not that your dad would mind that, if you looked up to him, but you don't. […] [I]n my experience he's very domineering and rude. It probably drives him crazy that you're so nice to everyone, and nothing seems to bother you (BWWAY; 150).

In this excerpt, Rooney alludes that Simon's father might feel intimated by his son's youth, and good looks and for this reason emotionally abuses, him by using the derogatory adjectives "domineering" and "rude". Indeed, Simon's father is part of a generation that has deeply internalised their role as dominant patriarchs and this "conservative ideology of gender still resonates within the culture, though neoliberal discourse equally imposes carefree norms on men'' (Hanlon; 50). Indeed, as the new societal order of the global market economy does not offer any alternatives in conduct codes, Rooney shows how old-fashioned fathers still try to mold and dominate their sons into emulating the hegemonic ideas they exemplify and carry out the societally instructed punishments if the sons refuse to unquestionably obey. The author

unveils that gender constructs are part of an intergenerational trauma that is carried on and reproduced within the family unit. It becomes clear that "societal norms surrounding masculinity mandate public displays of conflicting homosociality, where men assert dominance over each other, while public expressions of affectionate homosociality are discouraged or limited, regardless of whether their occur privately" (Bollos 2024; 6). Thus, Rooney underlines that social mechanisms of reproduction of gender reality are deeply ingrained in the family unit and gain their validity from the gendered subjects' obedience in performance.

The second relationship type described by Rooney is brotherhood, which I am going to analyse on the examples of Felix and Damian. After Felix ignores his phone calls for several weeks, Damian approaches him at a party thrown by common friends and savagely humiliates him in front of Alice by portraying him as illiterate. The following excerpt underlines their troubled relationship dynamic:

> I can read, by the way, [Felix] said. […] [Damian] was always better than me in school so I suppose he has to bring it up in front of people. [He] is one of these lads who has to put other people down so he can feel like the big man. Mam used to criticise him on that and he didn't like it (BWWAY; 299-300).

Retrospectively, it becomes clear that Damian lacks compassion and understanding for his brother and aims to bring him down in front of his female partner potentially ruining their relationship and leaving Felix weak and defeated. It can be observed that Damien's cruel display of dominance over his bisexual brother shows how he tries to legitimise his social standing as the dominating brother by placing his brother in an inferior role. Indeed, it becomes clear that these displays of power and socially dominant masculinities are not uncommon in relationships between men as they are supported by "[c]ultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalisation, and the marginalisation or delegitimation of alternatives" (Connell, Messerschmidt; 846). Therefore, it becomes obvious that healing in male interpersonal relationships in Rooney's novels remains a "huge task still ahead for the project of gender equality" (Connell 2016; 312).

Lastly, the third relationship type that I am going to analyse are male friendships. Here, I will analyse Connell's troubled relationship with Niall and Rob within educational institutions, while also drawing on a more positive outlook of possible freedom of heteronormative confines by looking at Simon's and Felix's attempts at closeness.

Indeed, Rooney's novels underline the deeply harmful effects of gender policing and social surveillance which control masculinity performances and paint a hegemonic version as

the only acceptable display of manhood in Rooney's characters' society. While I have previously established that family members police each other's gender performance, friends also engage in this harmful task:

> Under the table Rob showed Eric and Connell naked photographs of Lisa on his phone. Eric laughed and tapped parts of Lisa's body on-screen with his fingers. Connell sat there looking at the phone and then said quietly: Bit fucked up showing these to people, isn't it? With a loud sigh Rob locked the phone and put it back in his pocket. You've gotten awfully fucking gay about things lately, he said (NP; 76).

This passage powerfully exemplifies that the moment Connell refuses to participate in cruel acts against women, his friend Rob, here serving as an agent of social control, brands him as effeminate and deviating from heteronormative codes. As Rooney points out that "the dominance of heterosexual men and the subordination of homosexual men" is still very prevalent in Irish society (Connell 2005; 78), her character Connell is automatically placed in a subordinate position when being associated with homosexuality. While Connell is not actually a homosexual, ""gay" [is used] as [a] misnomer for soft, emotional, sensitive" (Bollos 2024; 32), characteristics that men are not allowed to embody under hegemonic heteronormative norms. It becomes clear that friends serve as each other's own torturers and inflict deep pain upon each other, as healthy and supportive alternatives to male interactions are considered unacceptable. Thus, by bullying Connell and calling out each his weaknesses, Rob tries to avoid his own victimisation and save himself from public disapproval.

Additionally, Connell's emotionally distanced relationship with Niall displays the boys' inability to establish an emotionally close relationship. When Connell's mental health worsens Niall aims to help Connell regain his strength, but has to do so in covert ways out of fear of judgment:

> It was Niall who told him about the service. What he said specifically was: It's free, so you might as well. Niall is a practical person, and he shows compassion in practical ways (NP; 201).

Rooney makes it a point to "mak[e] it clear that Niall's compassion is not expressed through emotional vulnerability or connection with Connell, but pragmatic suggestions that can have an immediate benefit for Connell who follows suit" (Bollos 2024; 45). This goes to show Rooney's critique of gender norms that force men into roles of rational authority figures while denying them an emotionally sensitive side. Thus, this scene calls out and critiques "neoliberal culture […] in which the external causes of mental health issues are not so important as the imperative

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to self-help (Darling 2023b; 25) and thus disregards the imposition of structural violence on the male self. It becomes clear that their own feelings and the feelings of their male friends initiate discomfort and confusion in Rooney's men, as they have been raised to reject feelings of care that have been traditionally attributed to women and thus would confine them to a submissive role exposed to violence and rejection.

Lastly, towards the end of *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, Rooney provides a vision of a potentially whole society allowing men to bond with each other emotionally, as well as romantically without becoming societal outcasts. The following scene depicts an unpoliced emotional exchange between two men allowing them to relieve themselves of their worries and connect with each other on a deep level:

> [Simon] said gently that he was very sorry to hear that Felix had lost his mother. Felix looked at him, screwed one eye shut, and then looked back down at the water. Yep, he said. Simon asked how he felt about selling the house […]. […] "[…] Felix reached to touch Simon's hand, and Simon let him. Down the inside of his wrist, down towards the palm, Felix brushed the back of his fingers slowly (BWWAY; 261, 292).

In the Irish context of Rooney's novels, this scene can be seen as truly groundbreaking, as this interaction happens in a soft, caring and understanding manner which previously seemed impossible in the novel. Rooney's deliberate choice of using the adverb "gently" underlines her stance that kindness and nurturing aspects should no longer be tied to solely feminine tasks but should be freely available to men. The author denounces "[h]egemonic masculinity['s] […] claim to […] represent the interests of the whole society" (Connell 2005; 165) and rather presents a vision of a society benefiting from unrestricted interpersonal closeness. Moreover, Rooney in this scene debunks the longtime established marginalisation of homosexual men and grants legitimisation "to homosexual men's experience with violence and prejudice from straight men" (Connell, Messerschmidt; 831). By depicting Simon's, a straight man's act of kindness towards Felix, Rooney depicts potential of heterosexual society to become accepting and respectful towards people with alternative sexualities. Hence, societal constructs of heteronormativity and dominant and oppressive power structures are yet again unveiled as deceitful and far from true self-discovery.

Finally, this chapter analysed the harmful consequences imposed ideas have on male relationships, their selves and their mental health. It has become clear that for Irish men control and surveillance occur in the home and the outside world, as they are surveilled by their parents

and peers, which confines and reduces their self to societally established visions of manhood. Thus, Rooney's message that a societal change in views of gender is undeniably necessary in order for men to develop a harmonious relationship with their bodies and selves comes to light with her depictions of male suffering caused by the confined spaces they inhabit.

3. Rooney's Vulnerable Irish Femininities

3.1 The Female Self and Society

In both novels, *Normal People* and *Beautiful World, Where Are You,* Rooney's concern lies with highlighting and exposing negotiations of the vulnerable female self in Ireland, a country which "[u]ntil comparatively recent times […] was a text written by men" (Stevens et al.; 405). While achievements mentioned in my introduction should be considered crucial elements of Ireland's westernisation and gradually growing open-mindedness towards influences previously considered corrupt, Rooney's works expose that contemporary women "exist in the same furrow as women before [them], albeit in a more aggressive market economy" (Darling 2021; 541). In their chapter "Introduction" to the monograph *Trauma, Memory and Silence of the Irish Woman in Contemporary Literature: Wounds of the Body and Soul*, Madalina Armie and Verónica Membrive elaborately summarise the history of suffering of Irish women during British Colonialism, the Irish Free State and the Republic of Ireland, as women's condition only started to experience more permanent changes with Mary Robinson's presidency:

> Abstinence, repression, sexual and physical abuse, obsession, loneliness, suffering, depression, and lack of love and aloofness within the family unit – clearly perceived in dysfunctional physical and emotional interactions between sexes – were presented as a harsh reality and a bleak backdrop of life for centuries (Armie, Membrive; 12).

While many of these deep-running issues remain present, Irish society has nonetheless seen major changes, which have been brought about by neoliberalism and technological progress. However, while recognising the progress that Irish feminists have achieved, Rooney's works sharply point out that contemporary women still find themselves exposed to structural violence perpetuated by the "de-gendered ideology of individual advancement" (Connell 2016; 310), which disregards prevalent discourses of gender polarisation and disproportionally aims to limit women's rights and freedoms. As "[in] Ireland the social subordination of women was until very recently, seen as ""natural", "inevitable", "what women want"" (O'Connor; 83),

discourses and voices of the female self have emerged as piercing voices aiming to break out of a vicious cycle of violence and silencing.

By showcasing that in contemporary societies "bodies […] continue to be objectified in a traditional sense" (Yang; 2) and depicting in particular Marianne's female self as subject to erasure under the patriarchal gaze, Rooney critiques the masculine view of the female body as a mere commodity:

> The barman looks frankly at her breasts while she's talking. Marianne had no idea men really did such things outside of films and TV, and the experience gives her a little thrill of femininity (NP; 30).

While at first glance it may appear that the male gaze aims to appreciate and validate Marianne's gendered self, Rooney in his excerpt showcases the detrimental consequences of the female self's reduction to an object of male desire and existence within a framework which necessitates male validation in order to not feel deficient. The fact that Marianne's sexed body is objectified by the patriarchal gaze denotes its potential susceptibility to violence and its coercion into a superficial performance of femininity.

Indeed, Judith Butler's performativity theory exposes gender as a mere socially imposed construct under which "to be a woman is to have become a woman, to conform to a historical idea of woman, to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialise oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project" (Butler 1988; 522). It becomes clear that Marianne's understanding of a female self is shaped by a society that forbids deviating from the socially ascribed norms of gender expression. By being conditioned to seek constant validation and social acceptance from men, the character of Marianne is utilised by Rooney to expose artificial definitions of womanhood as gravely detrimental to women's mental health and sense of self. By showcasing that Marianne's body is subject to social control rather than her own free will due to its subjection to objectification and abuse, Rooney underlines the lack of organic connection between Marianne's female body and self. Therefore, Marianne feels "trapped inside her own body" (NP; 64), which attracts violence, and lacks the self-esteem to express herself authentically due to constant exposure to social surveillance and control driving her to "view [her] own body with suspicion and terror" (BWWAY; 334).

Doubtlessly, "Rooney's female characters['] humiliation and self-loathing emerge as a consequence of self-blame and feeling of unworthiness" (Alfarez Mendia; 151), feelings which

stem from fear of social and patriarchal sanctions when failing to present a satisfactory gender performance:

> There's always been something inside [Marianne] that men have wanted to dominate, and their desire for domination can look so much like attraction, even love. In school the boys had tried to break her with cruelty and disregard, and in college men had tried to do it with sex and popularity, all with the same aim of subjugating some force in her personality (NP; 192).

This scene from *Normal People* serves as Rooney's skilful deconstruction of the myth of post-feminism, a movement which no longer finds use for fighting for women's rights. Rooney unveils the deceitful patriarchal lie that viewing women as possessions and trophies of sexual conquests can be an expression of true male care for women and shows that feminism still has a great task ahead to limit systemic violence against women. Indeed, being bullied at school for being too expressive and not "shav[ing] her legs" (NP; 3), thus not conforming to visual and behavioural codes imposed by the heteropatriarchy, Marianne's self is exposed to fragmentation and outside policing forcing her to detach from reality in order to stifle the pain. Since childhood, Marianne's reality has been marked by the alcoholism and physical abuse inflicted upon her by her father (NP; 44), who was the first man who conditioned her to believe that she has a duty to accept patriarchal abuse. Additionally, she is also assaulted by Pat, who is her brother's age, at the club. Literary scholar Alicia Muro observes that "Marianne's relationships with older men are always characterised by violence, impacting her low self-esteem" (107) and thus exposes the reason why Marianne invites men to abuse her, which is her pathological inability to imagine an existence without degradation. While Marianne's boyfriends are her age, her tolerance of their abuse stems from Marianne's experience of abuse from male authority figures.

Also, being sexually objectified by men at university leads to a further powerlessness experienced by Marianne who internalises the acceptance of the patriarchal codes as "a system which simply exists" (Darling 2023b; 28) and by which she has been brainwashed to comply. It can be observed that the vulnerable female self faces dissolution and self-hatred when conditioned to believe that something "is wrong with [it] and [it] can't be like normal people" (NP; 181) while being exposed to abusive influences from the outside. It remains important to point out that "normality'' embodies a socially policed and accepted version of the self based on a set norm that Bulter coins as "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform

in the mode of belief" (Butler 1988; 520). It becomes clear that the title *Normal People* refers to the narrow and confining expectations of Irish society from its' gendered subjects trapped in a societal construct of behavioural codes. Hence, the title can also be interpreted ironically, as Rooney debunks the idea of on universal concept of normality while emphasising the importance of developing an authentic self.

While Marianne is critically aware of the ongoing subjugation of women by the patriarchy, she has accepted the patriarchal violence as an all-encompassing power structure that she cannot escape. Thus she "[is ready to lie] on the ground and let [Connell] walk over her body if he wanted" (NP; 34), as she has accepted her role as inherently debased, which forces her to "navigate the narrow margins of her social and sexual condition, oscillating between submission and resentment towards her own practices" (Barros-Del Río 2022b, 184). It becomes clear that the brainwashing performed by the neoliberal patriarchy on the female self provokes grave traumatic reactions such as dissociation, self-hatred and self-erasure, as "contemporary women'[s] [...] rights conflict with the social impositions of society" (Armie, Membrive; 13). Thus, Rooney denounces the hypocrisy of contemporary society, which limits women's freedoms while depicting structural violence as a personal failure and locating the female body as a site for endurance.

Furthermore, when suffering from abuse at the hands of men, women are personally judged for the acts of sexual violence inflicted on their bodies, which are considered to bring shame on the victim shifting the blame from the male perpetrator to the female victim. After Marianne and Jamie's breakup, Jamie decides to make a public spectacle out of Marianne's suffering by telling everyone about the sadistic sexual acts he was inflicting upon her. While Marianne faces public disapproval and is "surrounded [by shame] like a shroud" (NP; 230), Jamie's harmful acts are brushed off as "that's just how lads behave" (NP; 230). Being unable to understand the mechanisms of oppression aimed at women, Connell wonders why "Jamie's reputation isn't damaged [as] [h]e was the one doing all that stuff to [Marianne] (NP; 230-231). By making Marianne reply that "[i]t's different for men" (NP; 231), Rooney critiques that women are still systemically disadvantaged in contemporary Ireland. Literary critic Pat O'Connor points out that "in capitalist societies, it is because men wish to be men, within a society where being a man involves the subordination of women, that patriarchy is perpetuated" (O'Connor; 83).

Undeniably, institutionalised oppression of women stems from performances of toxic masculinity that are valorised and confirmed in their success through the subordination of

women. Raewyn Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory also establishes that "[t]he social organisation of [bodily reflexive] practices in a patriarchal gender order constitutes difference as dominance, as unavoidably hierarchical" (Connell 2005; 231). Furthermore, it can be noticed that Jamie profits from what Raewyn Connell coins as "the patriarchal dividend" (Connell 2005; 79). While Jamie is celebrated as a sexually potent conqueror, Marianne's female self faces fragmentation due to "social stigmatisation of female sexuality [which proves that] [i]n contemporary society, sexual innocence and reputation are still valued, albeit often implicitly" (Yang; 7).

It becomes clear that men and women are not placed on equal footing due to restrictive norms of femininity and tolerance of male predatorial behaviour. Thus, Rooney's critique of the patriarchy, a system established by men for the benefit of men, surfaces throughout *Normal People*, as this conception of a societal order hinders women from developing a healthy and well-rounded sense of self.

While showcasing structural violence Rooney also underlines the personal victimisation of women at the hands of men by depicting the contemporary female self's obligation to assume a position of inferiority with its male counterpart in favour of maintaining romantic relationships and to avoid being punished and attacked. Rooney uses the famous literary hunter-prey analogy in both discussed novels in order to point out the duress under which women are placed by men who actively prey on them. While visiting Europe, Connell observes deer on the road which freeze when seeing the headlights of cars instead of saving themselves (NP; 187) and compares their behaviour to Marianne's. A similar scene can be observed in *Beautiful World, Where Are You* when Felix and Alice discuss the power dynamic of their relationship:

> If I ever do get a hold of you, you won't need to tell me, [Felix] said. I'll know. But I'm not going to chase too much. I'll just stay where I am and see if you come to me. Yes, that's what hunters do with deer, [Alice] said. Before they kill them (228).

This excerpt uncovers the patriarchal narrative of female powerlessness while representing the man as an active agent contrasted by the helpless woman who, as if hypnotised, is drawn to her abuser knowing that he will harm her. Here, just as in the previous chapter the verb "to kill" intensifies the brutality and cruel treatment imposed in this case on Marianne. The fact that the hunter does not even have to chase the deer in order to kill it, alludes to manipulation imposed on women, systematically forcing them to see abuse as an indispensable part of their life. Just like Marianne, Alice is aware of the harmful mechanisms defining her life as a woman but instead of defending herself, she is immobilised by them, as she has internalised her position as the weak and vulnerable other and is imprisoned by it. Indeed, "violence informs [Rooney's

women's] daily interactions while remaining off-limits to [them] as a response" (Darling 2023b; 18). Rooney's comparison of Irish femininities to the picture of a murdered deer covered in blood aims to reveal the true brutality of patriarchal abuse often masked and ignored in post-feminist cultures. Thus, the emphasis on women's vulnerability and restricted role oftentimes lacking agency is drawn while underling the constant patriarchal threat and Irish women's existence in fight or flight mode.

Furthermore, Rooney critiques the mechanisms of self-policing and self-erasure by which women are conditioned to reduce the substance of their selves for men to assess their superiority and not feel threatened. The process of women constructing their identity as incapable and weak in order to seek patriarchal approval can be analysed in Alice and Felix's conversation after her book launch in Rome:

> You were very good at answering the questions, [Felix] said. Did they give them to you beforehand, or were you making it up on the spot? […] Superficial fluency, [Alice] [said]. I wasn't really saying anything substantial (BWWAY; 88-89).

While being a successful and hardworking author, in her conversation with Felix, Alice feels pressured to downplay the quality of her speech. "[She] voluntarily undermines her talent, and forsakes her right to an autonomous subject position, for the sake of a normative heterosexual relationship" (Barros-Del Río 2022a; 51). Furthermore, Alice constantly tries to find excuses for Felix's lacking behaviour, as women with low self-esteem living in a society permeated by male cruelty are conditioned to compare their male partner's flaws with worse abuse and thus dismiss it as not that serious, a phenomenon I will look at in the next subchapter. Having grown up with a father "with a drinking problem and [having] had a disorganised childhood" (BWWAY; 29), Alice accepts Felix's wrongdoings for the lack of better options. Indeed, in "Feminism and Misogyny in Sally Rooney's Novels" Barros-Del Río points out that Alice "devalues herself so that Felix's integrity and superiority [can be] preserved [,] [which is a] form of internalised misogyny [that] contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequalities" (53). It becomes evident that Alice views the dissolution of her true self as a condition for a traditional relationship, which would be imbalanced and threatened by her self-sufficiency.

Finally, the last character suffering from an extremely severe version of self-hatred and low self-esteem is Eileen Lydon. Eileen faces alienation from her body and self up to a point where "[s]ometimes [she] hate[s] [her]self so much [she] wish[es] something heavy would fall on [her] head and kill [her]" (BWWAY; 206). It can be observed that Eileen's suicidal thoughts

and self-rejection stem from her inability to live up to traditional definitions of womanhood dominating neoliberal discourses. It comes to light that "free-market economics have conspired with a broadly post-feminist culture to support a distinctly neoliberal political agenda on gender which, beneath its liberal rhetoric, is both deeply regressive and potentially highly coercive" (Ging; 56). While working as an editorial assistant Eileen constantly views her life as lacking purpose, as at twenty-nine years old she has not yet married and born children. Rooney, thus, points out that Eileen's contribution to the workforce is not valued, as she exists in financial precarity and has internalised the widespread traditional image of successful femininity. In Eileen's interaction with Simon Rooney points out how this unattainable ideal of womanhood actively harms Eileen's self-perception:

> You need a little wife for yourself […] to come up to you at midnight and put her hand on your shoulder and say […] you're working too late. […] Your wife would have a job that finishes a lot earlier than [yours]. And when you got home she would have dinner waiting. […] [V]ery beautiful. A younger woman […]. Not too intelligent, but sweet tempered (BWWAY; 63, 67, 157).

This excerpt mirrors Rooney's critique of a traditionally prevalent image of fragile, infantilised, nurturing and selfless womanhood. Describing the wife figure as "little", Rooney denounces the patriarchal view of a woman as an inferior being, incapable of making sound choices. This excerpt also brings up the imposed role of a female caregiver conditioned to serve her husband, underlining the patriarchal paradox of viewing women as child-like, but at the same time having to assume the responsibility of caring for others. While the above-described wife is working, she at the same time carries the domestic responsibilities of the family debunking neoliberal freedoms of access to the public sphere as a double-edged sword, as women are now expected to hold a job and keep the home in order. Also, traditionally objectifying views of women, which have dominated in Ireland, are yet again brought to presence, as chief assets of femininity are considered, youth, beauty, sweet nature and a lack of intelligence. It becomes clear that as Eileen views herself as possessing neither of these characteristics, she considers herself deeply deficient and falls prey to "conservative social ideologies that place marriage and motherhood as the ultimate source of happiness and naturalise practices of submission for the sake of male dominance" (Barros-Del Río 2022a; 54). Eileen's perception of the world is deeply rooted in the legacy of her cultural upbringing, as her female "body comes to bear cultural meanings" (Butler 1988; 520), which have been forcefully imposed on her and regulate and control her thoughts and ideas of feminine morality. Finally, Rooney's striking critique of neoliberalism's complicity with the patriarchy, which I have discussed above, denounces "the disavowal of

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human vulnerability and victimhood" (Darling 2023b; 20) and raises awareness of the suffering inflicted on the fragmented female self.

3.2 Motherhood and Women's Complicity in Gendered Oppression

While at first glance it may appear that "damage is [solely] inflicted by male to female characters" (Alferez Mendia; 152), a closer look at Rooney's women's mothers and social circles reveals that women, for various reasons, are deeply implicated in the perpetration and reproduction of patriarchal abuse. Essential to conducting an analysis of Rooney's depiction of motherhood and female complicity in upholding harmful gender norms is acknowledging the oppressive force of the patriarchy exercised through a systematically enforced dichotomy between the male and the female while also looking at the author's deconstruction of the nuclear Catholic family.

The first maternal figure used by Rooney to denounce women's complicity in their own subjugation and the thriving of patriarchal power is Denise Sheridon, Marianne and Alan's mother. Being a successful and wealthy solicitor, Denise represents an economically independent woman, whose education and financial freedom still have not brought her salvation from her husband's abuse. In addition to that, patriarchal violence's claim as a legitimate tool to control women can be seen as deeply embedded in her consciousness, as being subject to abuse herself she allows her son to bully to degrade her daughter:

> Denise decided a long time ago that it was acceptable for men to use aggression towards Marianne as a way of expressing themselves. As a child Marianne resisted, but now she simply detaches […]. Denise considers this a symptom of her daughter's frigid and unlovable personality. She believes Marianne lacks 'warmth', by which she means the ability to beg for love from people who hate her (NP; 65).

Having been beaten by her alcoholic husband herself, Denise did not shield Marianne from abuse inflicted on her in the past by her father and does not protect her from it in the present by her brother. As Marianne according to Denise is unable to live up to social norms of a nurturing, sweet and docile femininity, her mother views the abuse as her daughter's punishment for nonconformity. José Carregal Romero argues about the family that "the function that each member should perform can be indicative of the cultural practices that are favoured by a given society. Seen in this light, one's own family might be the prime sector where social control finds its legitimacy" (Carregal Romero; 77). Indeed, as Denise has deeply internalised the patriarchal family structure, Alan has replaced her deceased husband as the patriarch of the

family, an unquestionable reality that she aims to force her daughter to acknowledge. Enduring abuse from her husband for years, Denise has been liberated from his violence by the mere chance of his death, showing that she has been unable to assert her rights and get a divorce. Thus, by siding with the patriarchy and unapologetically standing by her son's often wrong choices, Denise supports the dominating party in order to shield herself from possible future abuse. While it is possible that "Denise's silence and denial of the abuse might also suggest some shame on her part since she seems to have been allowing it for years" (Muro; 111), she sees herself as inferior to men to the point of not daring to challenge the system and even viewing it as natural. While Judith Butler rightfully asserts that "there is nothing about a binary gender system that is given" (Butler 1988; 531) and Clair Wills points out that "anxieties arising from economic dependency within marriage, and fears of being left without financial support, are no longer as pervasive as in the past" (Wills; 34), Rooney skilfully underlines that patriarchal abuse and shame are still transmitted as a system over generations of damaged women unable to exist outside of the realms of abusive mechanisms.

Another mother who inflicts irreparable damage to her daughter's self-esteem, while not abusing her physically, is Eileen's mother Mary Lydon. While being trapped in a financially and emotionally troubled marriage herself wishing that "something would […] change" (BWWAY; 32), she still judges Eileen for not living up to traditional norms of femininity, while favouring her daughter Lola who gets married and thus chooses a traditional heteronormative family constellation and fulfils societal expectations of womanhood. While her own life is marked by patriarchal oppression, just like Denise, she does not file for divorce, as she is part of a generation of women who have been brought up in a world where "[d]ivorce, abortion and homosexuality were regarded as sources of evil that would certainly destroy the Catholic family" (Carregal Romero; 85). Perpetuating upon Eileen a worldview of traditional womanhood as the ultimate source of happiness, Mary, "a mother who herself [has] internalised misogyny from her mother and from her cultural context" (Einhorn; 489) contributes to Eileen's gradual wish for a white picket fence fantasy where she can quit her job and live with "someone there to love [her] […] [j]ust make a home […] and to care for [her] parents when they grow older" (BWWAY; 213). Her mother's judgement and rejection can clearly be traced as sources of Eileen's self-hatred:

> Well, you'd be a lucky woman [to marry Simon] said Mary. […] And would he not be a lucky man? she asked then. Mary laughed again at that. Now Eileen, she said, you know I think the world of you. But I have to say that, because you're my daughter (BWWAY; 192).

This excerpt shows how Rooney dismantles the popular myth of nurturing and caring motherhood, by showing how Mary lacks understanding and support for her daughter while planting thoughts of deficiency into Eileen's mind to which marriage is presented as salvation. In her monograph *Bodies that Matter* Butler points out that "the regime of heterosexuality operates to circumscribe and contour the 'materiality' of sex, and that 'materiality' is formed and sustained through and as materialisation of regulatory norms that are in part those of heterosexual hegemony" (xxiii-xxiv). Indeed, it can be observed that Mary polices Eileen's expression of womanhood in favour of the heteropatriarchy and the nuclear Catholic family, as she and her oldest daughter consider it shameful and deviant that Eileen is "stuck in a shitty job making no money and living in a kip at age 30" (BWWAY; 100) and thus deviates from socially ascribed gender norms of womanhood. It becomes clear, that gender policing is part of generational trauma which is perpetuated from mother to daughter in favour of the patriarchal agenda. Therefore, Rooney voices the imminent issue of the generational deep-rootedness of abuse which paints mothers as their own daughters' abusers as they themselves are trapped in their own victimhood of patriarchal confinement without a route of escape.

Indeed, Connell and Messerschmidt establish women's centrality "in many of the processes constructing masculinities - as mothers; as schoolmates; as girlfriends, sexual partners, and wives" (848). The role of women in excusing, advancing and legitimising harmful impositions of gender norms is further underlined by Rooney through women's school friendships and interactions during their formative years, which often lack solidarity as they have fallen prey to the patriarchal goal of pitching women up against each other and preventing their union and revolt. By showcasing the toxicity of Marianne and Peggy's friendship, Rooney critiques that women are surrounded by unsupportive women who are complicit in patriarchal subjugation of women not only in the home but also in social and educational institutions making the vicious cycle of oppression omnipresent:

> Peggy has […] started to make fun of [Marianne] in front of others. […] It took a long time for it to dawn on Marianna that Peggy was using her guise of her general critique of men to defend Jamie whenever Marianne complained about him. What did you expect? Penny would say. Or: You think that's bad? By male standards he's a prince (NP; 137, 139).

Even though Peggy openly critiques male behaviour, her acts are paradoxically aiming to degrade Marianne and paint her as lacking, while downplaying Jamie's hurtful behaviour towards her. It becomes clear that for the reason that Peggy is unable to express her personality

freely, she directs her negative feelings towards Marianne, as she cannot express them to men openly. Indeed, scholar and senior lecturer in social work Sue Einhorn explains that:

> [U]nder patriarchy, women internalise misogyny which undermines [their] self-acceptance, [their] desire and often through mirrors that seem to know how [they] should be, [their] personal sense of who [they] actually are. The hidden turmoil within all of this not only results in feelings of envy and jealousy, of emptiness or loneliness but also, in fearing that men will kill [them], may express [women's] aggression by judging [other] women as lacking (497).

While Peggy thinks the worst of men, she shows the tendency to overlook the abuse Jamie inflicts upon Marianne, as according to her other men act even worse, which ironically grants redemption for Jamie's crimes. Thus, her behaviour harmfully marks Marianne's perception of abuse and drives her to blame herself and cast her worries off as exaggerated and overly sensitive, which harms her mental health and strengthens the everlasting grip of patriarchal abuse on her life.

Another female character who has deeply internalised misogynistic ideas of blaming women for a system installed by men is Helen, Connell's college girlfriend. By calling Marianne "slutty" and "craving male approval" as she is "always flirting with ten different guys" at parties (NP; 168), Helen shames the victim instead of the perpetrator. By calling Helen's values "old-fashioned" (NP; 168), Rooney subtly critiques conservative women's implication and judgment of branding other women as unworthy and deviant when not living up to ideas of moral purity and sexual morality. As challenging the patriarchy is impossible for many women due to mental and physical constraints, "women often feel freer to express their own aggression and even violence, painful as it is, but safer when directed to sisters, children and friends" (Einhorn; 490). Thus, Rooney's goal to showcase that not only men but also other women can be seen as a source of threat and fear to which women are exposed paints women's precarious situation in Ireland as very concerning and necessitating change.

However, it cannot be denied that while critiquing the Irish situation when it comes to gender norms, Rooney also provides a positive outlook on the future and the possibility of healing for women's interpersonal relationships, which can be brought to light by analysing the character of Connell's mother Lorraine. Being a single mother raising a child without male support, Lorraine has no tolerance for patriarchal abuse and wants her own son Connell to be held accountable if he does any harm to Marianne:

> Lorraine's nostrils flare white when she inhales. […] How did you get her to keep quiet about it? Did you tell her something bad would happen if she told on you? (NP; 56)

Being aware of mechanisms of fear and intimidation used by men to undermine women's rights, Lorraine aims to raise a man with a healthy masculinity that is not expressed by abusing the weaker sex. Lorraine also acts as a substitute mother for Marianne, who grew up influenced by "maternal abandonment and paternal authoritarianism" (Romo-Mayor; 74) as she shows her solidarity and support. By making Lorraine tell Marianne that Connell "doesn't deserve her" (NP; 62) if he does not treat her right, Rooney suggests a possibility of healing for Marianne's fragmented self through female solidarity and unity. Thus, "*Normal People* debunks the ideological construction of the nuclear Catholic Irish family demonstrating that Connell's single-parent and loving family performs better than Marianne's insensitive mother and abusive brother" (Darling 2023a; 180). Lorraine's kindness and competence as a single mother aim to represent a piercing light in the dark Irish history of "unmarried pregnant women [who] used to face shame and social exclusion [by a self-righteous society]" (Carregal Romero; 84) and thus paints a picture of strong and independent while also warm and caring motherhood.

Finally, Eileen's choice to keep her baby shows that "fear about the future of civilisation" (BWWAY; 334) should not hinder women from experiencing the joy of motherhood and taking upon them the essential task of raising future generations. Through Eileen, Rooney expresses that "women all over the world will go on having babies, and [Eileen] belong[s] with them, and any child [she] might have belongs with their children" (BWWAY; 334). This picture of female unity and healthy motherhood mirrors Rooney's hope for a better world, in which future generations do not repeat Ireland's dark times. Finally, while the patriarchy remains a force of dark dominance, it becomes clear that healing from women's generational trauma and hurt can be achieved by meaningful relationships with each other instead of inflicting harm upon each other and thus setting societal change in motion.

3.3 Forms of Patriarchal Abuse

For the last part of my chapter on Irish femininities, I aim to analyse Rooney's depiction of different forms of abuse inflicted on women by their male counterparts, leading to the dissolution of their self, a phenomenon I have discussed in detail in the subchapters above. The categories of abuse I have been able to identify are physical, psychological and sexual abuse, while for the last form, I am differentiating between crude and estheticised sexual violence. It can be stated that all these various forms of violence intersect with each other and act as cruel and merciless forces aimed at the annihilation of the female victim's sanity and self. I aim to

analyse the male perpetrators of violence one by one in order to showcase the destructive effects their abuse leaves on the female self.

Firstly, Alan can be identified as a major perpetrator of patriarchal violence. As Marianne's main abuser he inflicts physical and psychological harm upon her female body and mind "without thinking himself deviant [as he feels] authorised [to harass Marianne] by an ideology of supremacy" (Connell 2005; 83). Alan "prowls around the house looking for her" (NP; 229) when he comes home from work, as he views her as his possession and wants to be assured that his victim remains under his control. This constant display of power is reinforced by psychologically and physically debasing acts such as spitting on Marianne and grabbing her arm against her will (NP; 142).

However, it becomes clear that while Marianne is used to dissociating from her body, it is much harder for her to endure the psychological bullying. Alan tries to destroy Marianne's sense of self by denying her human worth and merely treating her as a possession without feelings while encouraging her to commit suicide (NP; 182). Already suffering from low self-esteem and lacking support within the home, "the existing gender norms and power dynamics in society turn [Marianne] into a target of stigmatisation, victimisation, and erasure" (Yang; 4). "Marianne's home life [can be seen as] a sado-masochistic laboratory" (Cox Cameron; 424) in which her family does not show her any support or kindness while only further enforcing her role as powerless and under their thumb by even going as far as scraping her dinner in the bin (NP; 65). This example shows that she has to submit to her brother's will while being denied the rights of an autonomous subject. The climax of abuse in Marianne's home can be observed when Alan breaks Marianne's nose with a door. By painting an explicit picture of "blood […] coming out of [Marianne's] face" (NP; 240) visually marking her brother's violence on her body, while making him deny his fault, Rooney calls out the victim-blaming nature of patriarchal abuse and men's refusal to take responsibility for their cruelty.

In this way, it becomes clear that Rooney, like other writers of "contemporary feminist literature still feels the urge to represent and reveal wounds that cannot be healed until patriarchal violence stops" (Aliaga-Lavrijsen; 32) by providing visceral and unapologetic accounts of patriarchal violence defining women's existence.

Secondly, being physically and psychologically abused at home, Marianne is also exposed to sexual violence, as the men surrounding her "assert [their] masculinity in sexual violence against women" (Connell 2005; 83). Rooney denounces the toxic masculinity culture

of expressing strength by committing violence against women in order to receive reassurance of masculinity from male peers:

> In one motion [Pat] moves his hand down from [Marianne's] shoulder and squeeses the flesh on the right breast, in front of everyone. Instantly she jerks away from him, pulling her dress up to her collarbone, feeling her face fill with blood. Her eyes are stinging and she feels the pain where he grabbed her. […] Rachel is laughing, a high fluting noise in Marianne's ears. […] He wasn't joking, he wanted to hurt her (NP; 41).

This excerpt shows the cruelty of crude sexual violence aimed at Marianne's body and "demonstrates the ruthless and unchallengeable nature of the male gaze, which leaves Marianne's sexualised body defenseless and susceptible to the possession of men" (Yang; 4). By making Marianne hide her breasts under her dress after the attack, Rooney shows how the victim tries to hide from the man's gaze and feels shame for her sexed body, as it attracts violence and humiliation. Marianne's physical and emotional pain after the abuse aims to underline the cruelty of the attack, which happened for no other reason than Pat's wish to dominate by inflicting suffering. This abuse perpetuated from male to female is not called out by Rachel, a woman present at the scene, but even rather enforced by her laughter. Rachel is glad to channel the violence away from her to another woman, which allows her to dwell in an illusion of temporary safety, a way of complicity to the patriarchy stemming from fear of abuse, which I have discussed above.

It becomes clear that Marianne inhabits a constant space of danger in which she is unprotected against gendered violence. Being exposed to violence from all sides, Marianne does not know how to exist outside of abusive relationships and thus uses masochistic sexual practices "to ritualise the societal aggression aimed at women and thus preserve something of a "self" as distinct from her sexed, and therefore degraded, female body" (Darling 2023b, 31). Thus, by burying the pain in her body sadomasochism is used by Marianne to channel her emotions towards dissociation and emptiness and thus temporarily avoiding pain.

While trying to reclaim power by willingly soliciting abuse, Marianne engages in a relationship with Swedish photographer Lukas, who incorporates Marianne's humiliation as part of his art. Orlaith Darling observes that "Marianne's masochism initially comprises an internalisation of structural violence. Allowing her to "ask" for violence and use her body to contain it, masochism adheres to neoliberal narratives of personal agency and individualistic subjectivity" (33). It becomes clear that Marianne has incorporated within herself the deceptive

idea that inviting abuse allows her to have some control over her interactions with men. As Lukas verbally degrades her, he takes photos of her while she is naked, blindfolded and tied up, reducing her humanity to nothingness. "Lukas views Marianne's gentle physical beauty as an opportunity to indulge in violent and animalistic desires through the visual operation of the camera" (Yang; 6) while gaining esthetic and artistic pleasure through his obscure and perverted act. Scholar Yang claims that "Lukas' camera serves as a voyeuristic tool, capturing Marianne's humiliation in a truthful yet cold manner [as] [i]n a post-feminist culture, the body has been liberated from its productive context but has become a victim of scopophilia" (6).

Additionally, in *Beautiful World, Where Are You* Rooney also problematises the societal view of sexual abuse suffered by women as visually pleasing and esthetic, while warning that rough pornography can harden men and represent female suffering as desirable and even necessary for male pleasure. The latter can be observed in the scene below where Alice discovers sadomasochistic porn on Felix's phone:

> The [porn] page displayed a list of search results for the query 'rough anal'. In the top thumbnail a woman was shown kneeling on a chair, with a man behind her holding her by the throat. Underneath that, another thumbnail showed a woman crying, with smeared lipstick, and mascara running in exaggerated trails from her eyes (BWWAY; 118).

This excerpt renders visible the consequences of societal normalisation of brutalised voyeurism, as the above-depicted images are reminiscent of the pictures of Marianne's humiliation taken by Lukas. Through Felix's gaining of pleasure by watching women suffer physical and emotional pain, Rooney denounces "gender-biased practices that objectify female bodies for male amusement" (Barros-Del Río 2022b, 75). The porn scene depicted above naturalises male domination over women and the commodification of the female body, as women are viewed as products available for consumption at any time. When Alice points out the abusive nature of these practices, Felix calls her "jealous of [the actresses]" (BWWAY; 121) which showcases the patriarchal lie that submission should be desired by women and defines their worth. While the actress' tears clearly depict her suffering, her smudged make-up and visual distress are often times looked at with pleasure by the male porn consumer creating dangerous and harmful expectations of real women to assume a degraded role during intercourse. Scholar Tobin observes that "[there] [is] a general worry among women that men are heavily influenced by pornography [and] [m]any women [feel] pressurised […] with regard to male expectations of how the female body should look and how women should act during intimacy" (263).

Surely, Rooney's critique of female's internalisation of diffused abusive practices can be seen by Alice's surprise that Felix did not force her "to try and take more of [his penis] when [she] knew [she] couldn't" (BWWAY; 179) during oral intercourse. Through Felix's realisation that Alice's fears originate from emulation of "the people in porn" (BWWAY; 179), Rooney denounces the patriarchal claim for ownership over the female body. It becomes clear that the looming danger of women's sexual abuse for male esthetic, physical and visual pleasure is ever present in neoliberal societies, which fail to hold men accountable for the pain they inflict.

Finally, the last form of abuse discussed in this thesis is paternalism, a covert form of abuse, which is defined by the infantilisation of the female partner, a concept which defines Eileen and Simon's relationship. This form of abuse denies the woman a self-sufficient life and puts her in the position of needing her male partner to fulfil even her most basic tasks. As previously observed with Alice and Felix's relationship, contemporary women feel forced to diminish their achievements in favour of male superiority in order to have a chance at love. Thus, Eileen calls Simon "daddy" (BWWAY; 145) and wants him to "tell [her] what to do with [her] life" (BWWAY 151) as she views herself as incapable of making rational choices. Indeed, Eileen has internalised the traditional role of female incompetence:

> It makes me feel very safe and relaxed. Like when I'm complaining to you about something and you call me 'princess', that turns me on a little bit. […] It just makes me feel like you're in control of everything, and you won't let anything bad happen to me (BWWAY; 151).

Out of fear of being hurt or judged, Eileen seeks protection from the dangers of the patriarchy by looking for a male caregiver and falls prey to paternalistic mechanisms detrimental to her self and her mental health. Barros-Del Río explains paternalism "[is a] form of patronising [which] entails a treatment of women as minors and lacking competence and puts men in a position of superiority. Consequently, this imbalance exerts a negative effect upon the female characters, who frequently show signs of decreased self-esteem" (Barros-Del Río 2022a; 51).

Indeed, Raewyn Connell also observes that "domestic violence cases often find abused women, physically able to look after themselves, who have accepted the abusers' definitions of themselves as incompetent and helpless" (Connell 2005; 83). It becomes clear that benevolent sexism, while not being a physical occurrence, greatly harms the female self, as it constructs their lives as utterly dependent and at the mercy of men. It becomes clear that by putting on a submissive act, women try to protect themselves from violence imposed on them by hegemonic ideas of masculinity.

This protective mechanism comes into play as female outspokenness is seen as threatening and constantly undermined in heterosexual relationships. For instance, due to Alice's argumentative nature, Felix constantly tries to convince her that she is "not the easiest person to get along with" (BWWAY; 301) in order to mold her according to his views and preferences of womanhood.

Even though "Rooney offers no vision of living radically outside the bounds of either capitalism or normative romantic structures" (Darling 2023b; 357), it is important not to oversee the small female choices to revolt against oppression, such as Marianne's choice to leave Lukas' torture laboratory (NP; 199) and Alice's demand that Felix ceases to give her "negative feedback" (BWWAY; 301). It becomes obvious that Rooney does not enforce misogynistic ideas, but rather paints a realistic picture of Ireland's backwardness when it comes to freedom of gender expression and underlines the long way still ahead of gender equality. Thus, Rooney's reassessment and critique of women's dehumanised, marginalised and discredited position in Ireland grants stifled Irish female voices a right to be heard and underline the constructed nature of the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity.

Lastly, *Normal People's* and *Beautiful World, Where Are You's* depictions of historical, generational and patriarchal abuse inflicted on Rooney's women's bodies, minds and souls do not allow readers to ignore Irish women's hardships and call upon them to question and dismantle socially constructed gender codes.

4. Conclusion

Rooney's novels *Normal People* and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* analysed in this thesis successfully deconstruct societally imposed ideas of gender constructs, while showing how topical gender roles remain in neoliberal societies. Written from a contemporary perspective, the novels denounce the confined existence of Rooney's gendered subjects, while almost visually depicting the consequent suffering to which they are subjected by rigid societal norms. Having followed the aim to showcase how Rooney's expression of gender-based critique surfaces in the novel and how heteropatriarchal oppression affects and defines the gendered conscience of Rooney's characters, this thesis has provided an in-depth analysis of masculinities and femininities in the discussed novels.

The first chapter "Rooney's Reassessment of Contemporary Irish Masculinities" has looked at expressions of the male self, male mental health and emotional repression, and the (im)possibility of male homosociality. In the first subchapter, it has become clear that in order to assert and express his masculinity, Connell shows signs of physical violence against other

men, while Felix and Simon find validation in the sexual conquest of young and vulnerable women, which according to hegemonic masculinity norms grant them a position of dominance. However, it has come to light that expressing their selves in these toxic ways leads to a lack of harmony between their bodies and selves and does not grant them relief from expectations from society and their families, as can be seen in Simon's case. To expand on this idea, the second subchapter has analysed the harmful consequences of strict gender codes on male mental health due to exposure to constant emotional repression, which leads to depression in Connell's case and even to suicide in Rob's. Also, the lack of recognition and support for male victims of sexual assault and Felix's inability to confront grief have shown the deep internalisation of masculinity norms and the fear of being associated with feminine attributes, factors denounced by Rooney's writing. Lastly, the third subchapter has looked at relationships between brothers, friends and fathers and sons revealing that gender codes force men to police and surveil each other's masculinity performances out of fear of marginalisation.

The second chapter titled "Rooney's Vulnerable Femininities" focuses on the female self, women's complicity in patriarchal oppression, motherhood and forms of patriarchal abuse inflicted on Rooney's female characters. The first subchapter shows how women's bodies are objectified by the cruelty of the male gaze by looking at the sexual assault suffered by Marianne while also focusing on the internalisation of patriarchal dominance by Eileen and Alice which makes them devalue their achievements and suffer from self-erasure. The second subchapter has demonstrated Rooney's critique of generational abuse inflicted upon women by their friends and mothers and continuing the cycle of violence, as is the case with Eileen and Marianne's mother. It has also come to light that female friendships among young girls perpetuate gender norms and often lack solidarity while imposing harmful policing as can be seen with Peggy and Helen. Finally, the last chapter has distinguished between physical, psychological and sexual abuse while analysing Rooney's denouncement of patriarchal and neoliberal violence. It has come to light that heterosexual relationships cannot exist within a heteropatriarchal framework without the subordination of the female self.

While Rooney does not offer easy fixes for Irish societal flaws when it comes to the imposition of gender codes, she offers glimpses of healing and hope by granting visions of loving motherhood, freedom of alternative gender expression, and nurturing and trusting relationships among men. These examples are presented as rare, yet powerful occurrences, deconstructing the idea of fast progress and showing that due to historical and societal wounds suffered by Irish gendered subjects, change is a slow and painful process. By depicting

characters who are conscious of the ongoing oppression, but practically unable to rebel due to the harm imposed on their mental health, Rooney uses her critical narrative voice in order to pierce through the oppressive silence confining her characters and grant their suffering recognition.

Although this thesis focused on a detailed reading approach, Judith Butler's performativity theory and Raewyn Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory have granted useful insights when applied to Rooney's works. Used in this thesis to analyse the constructed nature of gender norms, Butler's theory has clearly shown how gender identities are put on like costumes and enacted by Rooney's men and women out of fear of being branded as nonconforming and thus being subjected to ostracisation. Connell's research on hegemonic masculinity is of great help for this thesis when it comes to showcasing the violent and toxic ideas of dominant masculinity pushing men to actively harm themselves, their male peers, and their female counterparts. It has become obvious, that in essentialist discourses sex functions as a regulatory norm and in all unfortunate scenarios the blame for failure falls on the gendered individuals, as they have not been able to fulfil the culturally charged duties ascribed to them by tradition. Thus, both theories have proven the point that Rooney's characters are only judged and assessed by their physical attributes and functions by the society they inhabit.

Hence, after conducting a detailed analysis of masculinities and femininities in Rooney's last two novels, it becomes evident that both genders are trapped in confined emotional spaces, and are just like puppets controlled by powerful ideologies pulling the strings and hindering the characters from acquiring true self-identification. Consequently, leading an existence according to their real values, selves, and sexualities seems almost impossible for Irish women and men, as their free will is politically and socially sanctioned by institutional authorities.

All in all, Rooney's feminist ideological convictions in an omnipresent and illuminating way shine through the novels and reveal rigid gender norms as constructed and harmful by underlining their devastating impact on her characters. The Irish author strongly denounces the limiting of male and female ideological freedom and grants her characters inherent personal complexity by which she claims individuality for them. Finally, *Normal People* and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* illustrate a contemporary world infected by outdated oppressive structures and unveil the urgency of societal change for future generations, while showcasing the wounds caused to longing bodies and suffering souls.

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