
The Continuum of Irish Female Sexuality in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*: A Contradicted Ireland

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Abstract. After the Celtic Tiger years, Irish society seems to have transitioned into a much more welcoming environment for the production of literature, and in general, for the arts. The proliferation of literature, and, more specifically, of women writers and portrayals of girlhood, is giving way to a significant visualization of female voices and female issues, Sally Rooney being one of those voices. Therefore, in this paper I aim to analyse her contribution to the current Irish literary landscape through her novels *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018), where sex and female sexuality become two of the major themes. Trauma, guilt and shame (Free and Scully 2016), as key traits of recessionary Irish identity, will also be taken into account by looking into Rooney's characters' attitudes as they perform their own sexuality. Hence, both the advantage of a higher social awareness of female issues and the disadvantage of an ashamed Post-Celtic Tiger society mix, thus influencing the representation of 21st century Irish female sexuality, and also creating a definitely contradicted society (Crowley 2013), where social advances keep pushing forward while post-boom trauma and self-regulation keep them back.

Key Words. Irish female sexuality, Irish recession, Sally Rooney, female voices, contemporary Irish literature.

Resumen. Tras los años del Tigre Celta, la sociedad irlandesa ha adoptado un ambiente más acogedor para la producción de literatura, y en general, para las artes. La proliferación de literatura, y más específicamente, de mujeres escritoras y la representación de la infancia de las niñas está dando pie a una mayor visualización de voces y asuntos relacionados con las mujeres, siendo Sally Rooney una de estas voces. Por lo tanto, en este artículo, trato de analizar su contribución a la actual Irlanda a través de sus obras literarias *Conversations with Friends* (2017) y *Normal People* (2018), donde el sexo y la sexualidad femenina son dos temas centrales; por esta razón, el trauma, la culpabilidad y la vergüenza (Free and Scully 2016), se tendrán también en cuenta para analizar las actitudes de los personajes de Rooney a la hora de expresar su propia sexualidad. De esta forma, la ventaja de una sociedad irlandesa más consciente de los problemas de las mujeres se mezcla con la desventaja de una sociedad que,

tras la crisis del Tigre Celta, se siente avergonzada y culpable, creando así una sociedad contradicha (Crowley 2013), donde los últimos avances sociales impulsan hacia adelante pero el trauma y la autorregulación empujan en la dirección contraria.

Palabras clave. Sexualidad femenina irlandesa, recesión irlandesa, Sally Rooney, voces femeninas, literatura contemporánea irlandesa.

Due to the recent and increasing popularity of the young Irish novelist Sally Rooney, this paper will analyse her two first novels, *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018), as two significant contributions to present-day Irish society and to the continuum of Irish women writers whose interests have lied –and still lie– within the field of female sexuality. However, it is not only Rooney’s international recognition and impact that motivates this research, but also the explicit portrayal of her characters’ intimacy. Such depiction brings about a very convenient scenario for the analysis of current tendencies. Therefore, this article will take into account how Irish society has evolved to our present days, and more specifically, will consider the Celtic and Post-Celtic Tiger contexts as important factors influencing the representation of the protagonists’ sexuality in each novel –Frances in *Conversations with Friends*, and Marianne in *Normal People*.

Rooney’s openness can be understood to be in line with the latest feminist wave, which, influenced by the rise of social media, is much more centred on sharing individual female experiences in an attempt to “unmute” and globalise women’s concerns (Parry 2019). Therefore, this fourth wave takes back the motto of the second wave: “the personal is political”, as issues related to female sexuality still remain a concern. This is certainly so with novelists such as Rooney, whose frankness and explicitness of the intimate are probably two of the most important characteristics of her writings. Female sexuality is definitely a fairly topical and convenient sphere for current feminisms, since it still remains a key space for male violence to take place in a silent and clandestine way. As argued by Rosa Cobo, sexual violence should be regarded as a powerful tool to control women and prevent them from reaching the public sphere (2019: 138). Therefore, denouncing and speaking up about such violence remains extremely relevant for all societies, including Irish society, which is starting to play its part in raising awareness about this issue with the emergence and success of novelists such as Eimear McBride, Louise O’Neill or Sally Rooney herself.

Thus, so as to understand the current stage of literary representations of Irish female sexuality, the coming section will be devoted to recounting such representations, starting in the late 20th century, with the beginning of the Celtic Tiger period, and culminating in the present time. It will also be attentive to the different social mindsets that, since the Celtic Tiger years, have influenced attitudes and the construction of identities.

The Portrayal of Irish Female Sexuality in Irish Narrative: From the Boom to the Post-Boom.

The representation of Irish female sexuality has not always been consistent. For the purpose of drawing detailed attention to it, I will hereafter recount its development first throughout the Celtic Tiger years, then over the Post-Tiger period.

Celtic Tiger: Economic Fertility and Disguised Trauma

The arrival of the Celtic Tiger years (1995-2007) brought an environment of optimism and fortune that promised future prosperity, not only because of the economic boom, but also because of recent social advances; some of which were the modifications of the legislation about legalizing contraception or the campaign for Homosexual Law Reform, which also came hand in hand with the presidency of Mary Robinson (1990-1997), the first woman to be head of state in Ireland (Cahill 2018). However, in the middle of this period of bonanza, critics such as Julian Gough argued that “Irish literature had gotten smug and self-congratulatory during the boom” in that novels seemed to still draw much attention to “how terrible Ireland’s past was, with all its sexual repression and poverty” (Jordan 2015). Thereupon, many critics “decried the state of Celtic Tiger literature as disconnected from its contemporary economic and social dynamics” (Cahill 2018: 426). However, Susan Cahill argued that such stance, which dismissed any returns to the past, was being propelled by the rapid social changes during those years, this being an example of what Nietzsche called “active forgetting” (Bracken 2013: 159). With the arrival of a new capitalist mentality, there emerged an urge to quickly break with and bury the past in order to keep moving forward. However, as mentioned by Coughlan, there still existed some “unfinished business” (2004: 176). Much of this business had to do with the “persistent cultural constructions of woman as mother, the regulatory regimes that continue[d] to govern women’s bodies, and the continued exclusion of women writers from canon formation and official literary spaces” (Cahill 2018: 429). Therefore, women writers such as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Anne Enright or also Edna O’Brien would, during the Celtic Tiger period, continue to tackle those discontinuities or incongruences of their present society, which was a society that held tight onto a “narrative of progress and development” (Cahill 2018: 429) in an attempt to leave behind the traumatic past. This is how Ireland became what Ethel Crowley (2013) called “a mass of contradictions”, that is, the wish to constantly look ahead and never look back resulted in a society that, even nowadays, is haunted by double standards as a consequence of its unwillingness to solve outstanding matters. This was perfectly portrayed in novels such as O’Brien’s *Down by the River* (1996), which deals with the events related to the X-case of 1992, thus addressing certain problems –specifically those related to women’s bodies– still unresolved in the 1990s. Trauma in relation to women’s bodies prevailed as a topical theme in novels written by women during the 1990s and beginnings of the 21st century. These women writers became somewhat resistant to the current belief that the past had nothing to do with the present; what is more, they did not only reject that mentality but also proved it to be wrong by highlighting the contradictions of a society that preached equality and social progress whilst maintaining women’s bodies and histories silenced. However, the Celtic Tiger period was arguably not the best time to develop those critiques in the literary format; the capitalist economic boom and the urge to invest gave way to a cultural environment in which the arts stayed at a remove from the popular interest: “by becoming a literary writer, you were pretty much setting yourself in opposition to the dominant ideology of the time, which was to make money, buy property and spend ostentatiously” (Cahill 2018: 426). Therefore, figures such as O’Brien or Enright could be considered resistant in those years, not only because they resisted the “unrealistic” mentality of those times, but also because they drew attention to the capitalist attack on the arts.

Post-Tiger: Literary Fertility and Exposed Trauma

Now, with the end of the Celtic Tiger, a more fertile period for literary production began: this is the Post-Celtic Tiger period, an era that extends until current days, and is also the context in which Rooney’s characters navigate and construct their identities. As Claire Kilroy explained

in an interview, ever “since the collapse, there has been enormous activity and the big prizes and advances have returned to Irish literary fiction. It’s happening because in recent years it was acceptable to not be in ‘gainful’ employment, so people had permission to write again” (quoted in Jordan 2015). In fact, literary fiction has seen the emergence and success of many Irish female writers as a result of this new and more welcoming environment for the arts; Sally Rooney is an example of such proliferation, but some other renowned names are Louise O’Neill, Eimear McBride, Lisa McInerney or Sara Baume. The “creative energy” propelled by this “arts-friendly” atmosphere has significantly contributed to a wider representation of girlhood (Bracken and Harney-Mahajan 2017:2). The voices and stories of girls were also represented in previous periods, some examples are O’Brien’s *The Country Girls* (1960), Dorothy Nelson’s *In Night’s City* (1982) or *Anna Burns’ No Bones* (2001). However, girlhood as represented in fiction has rather been characterized by traumatic experiences and obscurity (Dougherty 2007: 50); and in fact, this is a feature that still prevails nowadays; in spite of the proliferation and visibility of women’s fiction –that is, fiction written by women–, trauma in the sphere of sexuality remains a theme of interest for female authors. A relevant example from recent years is Eimear McBride’s *A Girl is A Half-Formed Thing* (2014), where she focuses on the damage that her female protagonist suffers as a consequence of persistent sexual abuse. In fact, as Cahill explained, for the protagonist “sex becomes about momentary assertions of power and sustained self-harm, completely devoid of any expression of pleasure” (Cahill 2017: 159). Furthermore, there are also Louise O’Neill’s recent contributions to the representation of girlhood. Up until now, all her works –*Almost Love* (2018), *Only Ever Yours* (2014), and *Asking for It* (2015)– expose the process and experiences that a teenage girl usually undergoes, frequently highlighting the impact that capitalism and commodity culture –as key features of the Celtic Tiger period that developed during the Celtic Tiger period– had on girls. She does so especially in her dystopian novel *Only Ever Yours*, where she successfully introduces an evident analogy between girls and commodities. These examples are helpful to understand the main point of this article, which is that there is still “unfinished business” that needs to be addressed, and luckily, it is being done so with works such as the aforementioned. In fact, as Patricia Kennon argued, it is this “willingness [...] to problematize hegemonic power systems, address social injustices and present unsentimental, empowering narratives of youth agency” that is characterising Young Adult literature, and specially, the subgenre of female bildungsroman, which is still suffused with trauma–most of which comes from the familial sphere (Kennon 2020: 131).

These post-Celtic literary pieces, including those of Rooney, where trauma and self-harm come to the fore, reflect the legacy of Catholicism in Ireland, but they also reflect post-boom attitudes in Irish society. The economic crisis that followed the Celtic Tiger has had repercussions on Irish attitudes towards themselves and their own identity. Following the “hubris-nemesis” narrative,¹ by which the excesses of the Celtic Tiger transformed into recession and crisis in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, as argued by María Amor Barros-Del Ríó, Irish society has adopted “a discourse of personal responsibility and guilt” (2022: 2), which, at the same time, is underwritten by a neoliberalist mentality. In fact, this attitude is easy to recognise in Rooney’s female characters, for whom humiliation and self-loathing emerge as a consequence of self-blame and a feeling of “unworthiness”. As a matter of fact, this contemporary Irish attitude of self-regulation seems to echo the Catholic mindset, where self-punishment works as a form of expiation of sinful behaviour, which, in the case of post-boom Ireland, would be the material/capitalist excesses of the previous period. In this respect, it is arguable that whereas during the years of bonanza, society aimed to “actively forget”, now it

¹ As explained by Free and Scully (2016), the Irish post-boom recession represents what in Greek mythology is understood as the “nemesis” of the hero after a period of “hubris”: “the excessive pride, arrogance and self-confidence of hubris is usually punished by the gods” (311).

“actively remembers” to adopt an attitude of “humility and self-deprecation”, which, as argued by Inglis, is typical of Irish Catholicism and Irish culture (2006: 37).

Ultimately, and to conclude this section on a more positive note, it is also worth mentioning the feminist energy that has been developing over recent years, and how post-Celtic representations of femininity and female sexuality actually run in harmony with said energy. Apart from literature, this feminist activism has been notable in significant events, such as the Repeal the Eighth campaign of 2018, which aimed at women’s reproductive freedom; or also the performance of the School for Revolutionary Girls in the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in 2016. This was a project in which young women participated in:

an artistic “consciousness-raising” process that use[d] group discussion, performance and social media. Imagining the world as it is for them as young women, and as it could be, they explored issues important for their present moment, developing creative expressions of their own unique “public voice”.² (*The School for Revolutionary Girls*)

These social happenings have certainly set—and keep setting—the mood for the production of literature that is committed to the visibility of girls and young women’s voices. Thus, even though it has been a long journey, one can say that we arguably stand now at what Cahill calls a “potentially fertile moment of girlhood in Ireland” (2017: 168).

The Portrayal of Irish Female Sexuality in Sally Rooney’s Novels

Having covered the transition of attitudes and literary production from Celtic Tiger to post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, this section will be devoted to analysing Rooney’s characters and the representation of current social traits of Irish society.

In both novels, Rooney introduces two female protagonists—Frances from *Conversations with Friends* and Marianne from *Normal People*—that share a peculiarity: a ‘damaged’ personality. This is particularly notable in their coldness when relating with other people and with themselves, but most importantly, this coldness somehow drives them towards self-destruction or self-hate. Both protagonists suffer the consequences of a problematic familial sphere, where abuse and mistreatment have been and are part of their daily lives. Another important reality is also commonplace in these novels: damage is always inflicted by male to female characters. This proves that, as argued by Cronin, there certainly still exist “many damaged and damaging individuals” (2012: 2) in present Irish society, mostly, as a consequence of the post-Celtic Tiger economic crisis, which, as explained by Barros-Del Río, “resulted in the repolarisation of class and gender, [...] with a marked regressive orientation” (2022: 2). Therefore, Rooney presents a society that, in spite of being modern and topical—in fact, religion is hardly ever mentioned—, still has to deal with some “ghosts of the past”, thus exposing an Irish society which still today remains contradicted.

² The proclamation they performed at the IMMA reads as follows: “In a fair land women would feel safe when they are walking home. In a fair land no one will suffer in silence. In a fair land persons who suffer from mental health issues are equal to everyone else and will no be viewed as lesser than others. In a fair land women will not need protection against rape or assault. In a fair land our happiness and self-worth will not depend on the things we buy. [...] In a fair land we will all treat people according to their personal struggles, experiences, and circumstances rather than according to their body image, gender or colour of skin. In a fair land we stand together with everyone not just as our own separate entities. In a fair land we will have the power to make a difference” (quoted in Cahill 2017: 154).

Female Sexuality in *Conversations*

To begin with, in *Conversations with Friends*, Frances's relationship with her family—and especially with her father—notably shapes her personality and influences the way she even conceives herself as someone who is not “worthy of love”. At the beginning of the novel, the reader learns that both Frances and her mother were victims of abuse because of her father's alcoholism: “My father had ‘moods’. [...] [H]e would bump into a piece of furniture and then lose his temper. He hurled one of my school shoes right at my face once after he tripped on it. [...] I learned not to display fear, it only provoked him. I was cold like a fish” (Rooney 2017: 48-49). This last statement is paramount to determine the origin of Frances's “coldness”. There is certainly a link between the emotional numbness and the events or traumatic experiences she had to go through when she was a child. In fact, her father's problem with alcohol is not a matter of the past, since Frances is recurrently disturbed by her father throughout the novel, as if he were a ghost haunting the development of her bildungsroman: “Outside the ice-cream shop my phone started to ring. It was my father calling. I turned away from the others instinctively [...], as if I were shielding myself. [...] I started biting on my thumbnail while he spoke, [...] Is everything okay? I said” (119-120). It is also interesting to notice what her interactions with her father provoke in her; the reader gets to know that Frances does not feel comfortable whenever she visits his house: “His drunkenness made me feel unclean. I wanted to shower or eat a fresh piece of fruit” (120); in fact, this discomfort even drives her to self-harm when she notices the mess in her father's kitchen: “Several half-eaten meals had accumulated around the table and countertops in various states of decay, surrounded by dirty tissues and empty bottles. [...] I wanted to hurt myself again, in order to feel returned to the safety of my own physical body” (181-182). Self-harm in this passage appears as a way out of the distress caused by external factors, and it definitely works as a form of redemption or expiation, typical of post-Celtic Tiger attitudes.

As regards Frances's mother, hers is one of the most vivid depictions of a contradicted mentality. Whilst she approves of Frances's open relationship with Nick—who is a married man—she also tries to force her child to care for and love her father in spite of all the abuse: “You must love him, she told me when I was sixteen. He's your father” (175). Here is a clear portrayal of a deep-rooted traditional mindset that supports the nuclear family and that, most importantly, supports the female figure as someone who must endure suffering, a distinctive principle of Catholic Ireland: “I believe I raised you to be kind to others, she [Frances's mother] said. That's what I believe” (175). However, in contrast to her mother, Frances attempts to reflect and question such values:

Was I kind to others? It was hard to nail down an answer. I worried that if I did turn out to have a personality, it would be one of the unkind ones. Did I only worry about this question because as a woman I felt required to put the needs of others before my own? Was ‘kindness’ just another term for submission in the face of conflict? These were the kind of things I wrote about in my diary as a teenager: as a feminist I have the right not to love anyone. (176)

This proves how Frances's mentality, as a young woman belonging to the millennial generation, differentiates from her mother's, who belongs to the X generation. Frances might be an unsettled subject, belonging to a still “unsettled culture” (Swidler 1986). However, Rooney clearly portrays here a young woman who is making the effort of analysing herself, and most importantly, she is giving space to Frances's voice, to a young girl who declares herself a feminist in tune with the current feminist energy in Ireland.

More contradictions arise since Frances is encouraged by her father to be responsible for her own spendings, ignoring the fact that he is giving advice that, due to alcoholism, he cannot put into practice:

[...] You're not stuck for money, are you? said my father.

What? No.

The old saving, you know? It's a great habit to get into. (Rooney 2017: 120)

In fact, women being made accountable for household expenditures is one of the concerns that the Irish Women's Liberation Movement from 1970 aimed to tackle: "women were often more responsible about finance than men, and as mothers in the home, were more careful about budgeting and housekeeping" (Kenny 2019: 136). It must also be recognised that women are not just "more responsible about finance", but that, as shown here in Rooney's novel, they are rather *made* responsible for it.

Following this interest in providing visualization to girlhood and women's bodies, Rooney also introduces the reader to one of the most silenced illnesses nowadays: endometriosis. This medical condition, which only affects women, is currently in need of further and deeper research: "the general public and most front-line healthcare providers are not aware that distressing and life-altering pelvic pain is not normal, leading to a normalisation and stigmatisation of symptoms and significant diagnostic delay" (World Health Organization 2021). In fact, according to the Endometriosis Association of Ireland (EAI), there is a nine-year diagnostic delay in Ireland, positioning endometriosis as one of the most neglected diseases at the moment (Endometriosis Association of Ireland 2019). In *Conversations with Friends*, Frances experiences the symptoms of this illness without knowing about her medical condition for more than half the novel. Moreover, when she is assisted at hospital, after being subjected to different examinations doctors are clearly portrayed as lacking awareness of this issue: "The doctor came back several hours later and confirmed that I had not been pregnant, that it was not a miscarriage, and that there was no sign of infection or any other irregularities in my blood work" (Rooney 2017: 169). Frances is not diagnosed as suffering from endometriosis until the end of the novel, thus showing how tedious is the process of detecting and identifying such a disease:

The doctor told me that I had a problem with the lining of my uterus, which meant that cells from inside the uterus were growing elsewhere in my body. He said these cells were benign, meaning non-cancerous, but the condition itself was incurable and in some cases progressive. It had a long name which I had never heard before: endometriosis. (270)

The disinformation about this illness precisely represents the reality in Ireland. As regards women's bodies, Rooney also introduces Frances's hypothetical miscarriage as another experience that she faces alone; after calling Nick several times to notify him of her situation, she manages to talk to him but only to find out that he is not in a welcoming mood and definitely not willing to worry about her: "It's only 2 a.m. here, you know, he said. Everyone's still awake, [...] [a]re you trying to get me in trouble? [...] His voice contained both secrecy and anger in a special combination: the secrecy enriching the anger, the anger related to the secrecy" (168).

One last experience that Frances must handle alone is consensual sex. At the end of the novel, Frances has sexual intercourse with Rossa, a young man she meets via an Android app, and even though both initially agree to have sex, Rooney makes it very clear that during intercourse sex is not enjoyable or fair for Frances:

Physically I felt almost nothing, just a mild discomfort. I let myself become rigid and silent, waiting for Rossa to notice my rigidity and stop what he was doing, but he didn't. I considered asking him to stop, but the idea that he might ignore me felt more serious than the situation needed to be. Don't get yourself into a big legal thing, I thought. I lay there and let him continue. He asked me if I liked it rough and I told him I didn't think so, but he pulled my hair anyway. (208-209)

This scene displays two recurrent problems in Irish girlhood nowadays: the first one has to do with consent, and the second one with the pleasure gap. This has arguably been an issue for Irish women for a long time; back in the 70s, letters sent to Angela Macnamara's³ famous column already proved so with comments and questions by women who wished to improve their sex lives. Some of them even got to wonder whether "Irish men [...] kn[e]w how to make love" (quoted in Ryan 2019: 124). Thus, in spite of being a long-lasting issue, little improvement has been made, so much so that, as Rooney represents, this is still considered a problem for women. In fact, other contemporary female writers have also shown a special interest in the same issue, such as Louise O'Neill, particularly in *Almost Love* and *Asking for It*, or also Eimear McBride in *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*. Furthermore, it is also arguable that in the scene quoted above, Frances' willingness to put up with the situation is similar to Marianne's masochistic attitude in *Normal People*, and, therefore, this can also be understood as a post-Celtic Tiger-encouraged trait: again, the intention to endure suffering, maybe under the belief that this situation was motivated by her.

One last aspect that must be addressed due to its contradictory nature is Frances's relationship with her best friend and ex-girlfriend, Bobbi. In the novel, no objection is raised to their same-sex relationship, not even by Frances's parents; however, in spite of presenting a society completely tolerant with "who to love", Rooney shows the discrepancies arising from "how to love". The incapacity to label Frances and Bobbi's relationship is one of the most unsettling problems that Frances must figure out throughout the novel:

Who even gets married? Said Bobbi. [...] Who wants state apparatuses sustaining their relationship?

I don't know. What is ours sustained by?

That's it. That's exactly what I mean. Nothing. Do I call myself your girlfriend? No. Calling myself your girlfriend would be imposing some prefabricated cultural dynamic on us that's outside our control. (305-306)

In fact, intolerance to open or non-monogamous relationships becomes much clearer in discussions with Frances's university peers: "at some point the conversation turned to monogamy, a subject I didn't have anything to say about. [...] I noticed that Phillip and Camille were exchanging glances. At one point Phillip looked at Andrew, [...] and Andrew raised his eyebrows as if Bobbi had started talking gibberish or promoting anti-Semitism" (252-253). Thus, what can be seen here is the still popular disbelief or mistrust in constructing relations that escape traditional social labels, which is another conventionality retained at present modern Ireland.

³ This was a problem page column published in the *Sunday Press* and directed by journalist Angela Macnamara from 1963 until 1980. It served as a space for people's questions on different matters (sexual ones included), and it was especially revelatory of new Irish attitudes towards sex during the 60s and 70s. See Ryan (2019).

Female Sexuality in *Normal People*

As regards *Normal People*, Marianne's personality and further expressions of her sexuality are also influenced by her familial relationships, and just like Frances, Marianne also conceives herself as someone unlovable: "I have a coldness about me, I'm difficult to like" (Rooney 2018:101). Likewise, the "coldness" that Marianne mentions is a result of traumatic experiences within the familial sphere. This novel is the one in which, to date, Rooney best displays the obscure sexuality of a female character as a victim of domestic abuse. Her brother, Alan, is introduced from the beginning of the novel as the most potential aggressor for Marianne, and her mother, Denise, in spite of having suffered the mistreatment of her husband, becomes an accomplice of her son's aggressions towards her daughter: "Denise decided a long time ago that it is acceptable for men to use aggression towards Marianne as a way of expressing themselves. [...] 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" (Rooney 2018: 65). This idea of "begging for love" certainly hints at the same mentality that Frances's mother –from *Conversations with Friends*– had when she asked her child to be kind to others even when others were not kind to her: it is again the thought that girls ought to endure suffering, originating from Catholicism. What is most interesting, is that in spite of Marianne's much more liberal mentality, she still cannot but surrender to violence, becoming in this way a "silent, resigned and passive" young woman, which, as argued by Inglis, are typical female traits that date back to Catholic Ireland (Inglis 2005: 24-25). In fact, these traits are clearly portrayed in different aspects of her life; for the purpose of this paper, the most important focus is on her sexuality, but it is also worth mentioning that her values seem to be also affected by such an identity. This is significantly portrayed in the scene in which she joins a protest against the war in Gaza: "Marianne wanted to stop all violence committed by the strong against the weak, and she remembered a time several years ago when she had felt so intelligent and [...] powerful that she almost could have achieved such a thing, and now she knew she wasn't at all powerful and she would live and die in a world of extreme violence against the innocent" (Rooney 2018: 228). This same submissive conduct is also adopted in the performance of her sexuality. There are many scenes along the novel that display Marianne's tendency to passivity even when her male partners do not intend her to do so:

Do you want it like this? he says.

However you want. [...] Whenever you want. [...] You can do anything you want with me. [...] Will you tell me I belong to you? [...] Will you hit me? she says. [...]

No, he says. I don't think I want that. Sorry". (236-237)

Sexual intercourse –with any man– becomes a space in which she always wishes to let her partner dominate and hold power over her; apart from the self-harm that such relations cause, Marianne also does so because she assumes that dominating her is what really pleases men: "I just like to know that I would degrade myself for someone if they wanted me to" (132). Again, this conduct echoes the aforementioned Catholic model of woman, and it also draws attention to how male pleasure becomes the focus in sexual relations, bringing to the fore again the pleasure gap still existing nowadays. In fact, her relationships with Jamie or, later on, with Lukas, are similar for one reason: they both accept and adopt a sadist role. In that sense, just as in Eimear McBride's *A Girl*, sex is also understood by Marianne as "momentary assertions of power and sustained self-harm, completely devoid of any expression of pleasure" (Cahill 2017: 159). In addition to this, it is important to mention the presence of another female character – apart from Denise– who also urges Marianne to adopt such a submissive attitude, especially with men: this is Peggy, one of her friends at university. What seems to be so "contradictory"

about Peggy is the fact that she is presented as being a really progressive subject –in fact, she is capable of talking about open relationships with no taboos– whilst she actually supports the “boys will be boys” narrative: “Peggy was using the guise of her general critique of men to defend Jamie whenever Marianne complained about him. What did you expect? Peggy would say. Or: You think that’s bad? By male standards he’s a prince” (Rooney 2018: 139).

It is arguable then, that apart from Connell, Marianne never manages to construct a healthy relationship with any men: “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” (Rooney 2018: 192). In fact, even her original relationship with Connell can be considered damaging and humiliating. Whilst Marianne has a privileged social class, it is Connell who enjoys a privileged social status, and this is what drives him to ask Marianne to keep their relationship private: “I think it would be awkward in school if anything happened with us” (Rooney 2018: 15). Indeed, after analysing Marianne’s passive conduct, it is less surprising to know her reaction towards such a request: “No one would have to know” (Rooney 2018: 15). Thus, two things are made clear: Marianne has certainly a damaged personality, but that is only as a result of other damaging characters surrounding her. As regards Connell, it is also important to note that in relating with Marianne, lack of acquisitive power becomes a problem for him as a male character. What Rooney clearly represents through him is that men, as in the past, still feel pressured nowadays to court women, but the difference is that now, courtship costs some money (Illouz 1997; Jackson *et al.* 2011); in fact, doing dating activities like “go[ing] out to dinner, going to the movies or theater, and giving [...] gifts” appear to be unaffordable for Connell (Jackson *et al.* 2011, 3); in turn, he becomes particularly aware of the fact that he can hardly offer Marianne anything that requires investing money; as a matter of fact, it is Marianne the one who does so: “She bought him things all the time, dinner, theatre tickets, things she would pay for and then instantly, permanently, forget about” (122). In that sense, the conventional role by which men must pay or invite women is inverted in such relationship, and this is –at least, partly– what triggers Connell’s discomfort in his relationship with Marianne. All in all, what this analysis aims to do, is to highlight how topical gender roles are even nowadays, and whereas women are still made and expected to submit their identities, men are urged to provide their courted female with commodities, which represent and support their male power. In this context, it is arguable that Connell appears as another character that retains many traditional values. This drives me to mention one last point dealing with contradictions in present Ireland. As was previously mentioned in the analysis of *Conversations*, relationships which do not comply with traditional labels –lovers, friends, ex-lovers– are still difficult to understand. Indeed, this is also the case of Marianne and Connell’s relationship, where sex, friendship and romantic love mix together conforming a type of relation difficult to describe. The complexity of dealing with such a relationship is mainly depicted through Connell, whose discomfort with being in such an uncertain type of relationship pushes him in and out of Marianne’s life repeatedly:

When did you two split up, then? Lorraine [Connell’s mother] asked him.
 We were never together. [...]
 Young people these days, I can’t get my head around your relationships.
 You’re hardly ancient.
 When I was in school, she said, you were either going out with someone or you weren’t.
 (125)

Lorraine’s reluctance towards such a relationship is based on the traditional binary thinking, which excludes uncertainty and “undecidability” to include more established, conventional and better-defined relational options (Alfárez 2022). In fact, this is what Connell does when he starts

a relationship with Helen, and his thoughts prove his predilection for more socially accepted relations: “he doesn’t feel shameful things, [...] he doesn’t have that persistent sensation that he belongs nowhere, that he never will belong anywhere. [...] He knew that he belonged with her [Helen]. What they had together was *normal*, a *good* relationship” (Rooney 2018:169-170, my emphasis).

Conclusion

Rooney’s interest in stressing women’s issues is what clearly frames her as a female writer of the Post-Celtic Tiger generation. Furthermore, her concern for traumatized female sexualities, together with her disinhibition and willingness to share female intimacy and vulnerability, contribute to the current tendency to focus on the construction of young women’s sexuality. Hence, she keeps up and extends the continuum of female novelists who write about girlhood and female sexuality.

One of the most important conclusions that must be drawn from her treatment of women’s sexual lives is that the trauma she reflects in her novels remains unsolved by the end of the stories, indicating in this way the necessity of more social and mindset changes, but also, the impossibility for women of doing away with their current social position just by themselves. As Rooney argued in an interview, she did not feel completely convinced about the idea of female agency or female emancipation that many feminist movements have sustained as the only way out of patriarchy and gender inequality: “to believe in myself as an individual or as an independent person it just seems delusional [...] my life is only sustained by my position within all these networks that I belong to, whether I like it or not” (Rooney 2019). This is why she always draws significant attention in her novels to human relationships, and this definitely explains the correlation between Marianne’s and Frances’s familial relations and the further expressions of their identities and sexualities. It, therefore, explains as well why, in spite of the passage of time and social advancement, women still remain an underprivileged group.

In short, her novels currently play an important part in the visualization and representation of Irish girlhood and Irish female sexuality, but they are also of great importance because they present a realistic portrayal of present Irish society, and in spite of acknowledging the latest social advances in Ireland, they also reveal the country’s lingering reliance on outmoded values. Thus, she presents the reader with a still contradicted society, whose only way to keep evolving and moving forward is first by looking back, then remembering and accepting that there is some work still to do.

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Received: 1 September 2022

Final version accepted: 14 February 2023

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