



AFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A DERRIDEAN APPROACH TO SALLY ROONEY'S *NORMAL PEOPLE* AND *CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS*

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Ireland's progressive liberation from the strict Catholic rule involved a considerable amount of social changes, which have affected gender roles, conventions on marriage, family and even the way that 'love' is approached nowadays (Fine-Davis 2015). In fact, this is what Sally Rooney has so far represented in her novels. As the reader navigates through her two first novels—*Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018)—, it becomes more obvious that one of Rooney's main interests is to question much of the normative conducts of affectivity. Her novels present different relationships that struggle to fit in several conventions related to love and affection, starting from monogamy and continuing with social labels attempting to define relations, —such as 'friends', 'lovers', 'married', 'single', etc. —or what Rooney herself called as “prefabricated cultural dynamics” (2017, 306). As explained by her, “[w]e don't have a way of speaking about these non-relationships, where someone is your friend but maybe you [sleep with them]. [...] [W]e don't have the vocabulary to describe [it]” (quoted in O'Regan 2017). In that context, this paper analyses these relationships from a philosophical point of view. Specifically, the society which is presented in both Rooney's novels will be

studied as having a structuralist organization, articulated by binary thinking. That is to say, any relation that does not conform to one of the labels previously mentioned is doomed to stay in the private and silent sphere due to the threat that these pose to conventions and normativity. Thereby, these ‘unlabelled’ relationships that Rooney presents in her novels will be compared to the ‘undecidable’, as a concept original from the Derridean philosophy, which is understood as an idea that “slip[s] across both sides of [a] [binary] opposition but [doesn’t] properly fit either. [It] [is] more than the opposition can allow. And because of that, [it] question[s] the very principle of ‘opposition’” (Collins and Mayblin 1993, 38). Following this, the main subject of study, then, will be the representation of such defiant – ‘undecidable’ – relations in a structuralist society that still intends to lead Western thinking to a binary and, on many occasions, discriminatory mind-set.

Keywords: Relationships; affectivity; undecidability; structuralism; binarism

1. Introduction

In a world recently hit by the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent analysis of interdependence between people, is where the Irish novelist Sally Rooney starts to become more popular specially among young people. Her works revolve around the idea that “there is no ‘you’ without others” (London Review Bookshop 2019), and this is what makes her contributions match the current worldwide context so precisely.

In reading Rooney’s novels, some people might fall into the mistake of thinking them as simple love stories. However, Rooney provides a full portrayal of unconventional—but very natural, and fairly topical—affectionate relationships, which, on many occasions, stay away from the typical romantic approach in love stories. Therefore, due to her unconventional and thought-provoking stories, this article aims to explore the formation of affective relationships as portrayed in her two novels *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018). The main interest is to uncover the terms of the relationships that people—as represented in Rooney’s novels—

build and establish in the present generation and society. In other words, the focus is to go beyond the surface of the current relationships' construction, and to explore those unquestionable and deep-rooted codes nourishing the type of relationships that almost everyone has been establishing so far. Some of those codes include the great importance of marriage as an institution that endorses union and 'real' love, and also the normativity of monogamy that the latter enhances.

Starting from her latest novel—*Normal People*—, Rooney depicted an on-again, off-again type of relationship between Marianne, a loner and upper-class girl, and Connell, a popular and middle-class boy whose mother worked as a cleaner at Marianne's in the fictional Irish town of Carricklea. Rooney also explores the concept of normality as affecting Connell and Marianne's relationship, which struggles to fit the social 'normality'. This concept of 'normal'—quite related to the concept of 'convention'—, is going to be central in this research, since it covers all those codes which construct people's relationships, and it certainly has to do with a relationship's capacity to be labelled.

Conversations with Friends, the novel with which Rooney debuted, also revolves around an unconventional love story. Nevertheless, this time the story does not involve only two people, but four; there is Frances, who is both the narrator and the protagonist of the novel; and there is also Bobbi, who is Frances' ex-girlfriend. Despite not being girlfriends anymore, these two characters still keep a tight relationship between them. At the same time, they start to create closer ties with a married couple: Melissa and Nick; and in so doing, they introduce themselves to a polyamorous relationship. Thus, in *Conversations with Friends*, Rooney creates a net of relationships in which every character plays a part, introducing this way a collective or communal perspective of these relations. Again, the topic of normality and normativity jumps out and becomes one of the main issues.

Thus, having briefly introduced these two novels, it is easy to notice that the shared and common idea between both literary pieces is the representation of unconventional relationships and the questioning of the conventional ones. Henceforth, the next section

will deepen in the current social understanding and treatment of affective relationships, both at West and Irish level.

2. Preliminary Aspects

To thoroughly understand the formation of current relationships and its representation in Rooney's novels, special attention will be drawn to the social institutions that regulate them at present, the current understanding of the same and the emergence of new ways of relating and forming families. Among those institutions, it is noteworthy those propelled by the church, such as the nuclear family or traditional marriage.

2.1. The 21st Century West and the Question of Love

Certainly, love—or the way it is understood—has changed over the years, but mostly it has opened up to new forms, as argued by the psychologist Esther Perel in an interview: “the fundamental human need [...] for connection [...] will never change”, but society does change, and as a result of that: “the expressions, [...] and the institutions in which we will seek those fundamental human aspirations will continuously transform” (Howes 2020). Accordingly, the changes experimented in society have also affected literature; and this has been notable from the very beginning of the century. As regards the theme of love, it is young adult fiction the genre which has developed the most its representation, and one of the reasons for that is, as argued by Claire Hennessy, that young adult fiction can be considered to be the 21st century bildungsroman (2020).

Thus, love experiences occupy a relevant place. In 2005, Kaplan argued that: “we [were] on the precipice of reinventing ourselves because our young adult books [were] constantly in search of the new and revealing” (11). In fact, one of those searches of the new and revealing is the increasing representation of queer love; young adult fiction appears as the main genre addressing this theme, and it gives space for “typically-neglected voices” (Hennessy 2020). However, what is so revealing is not only the emergence and

increasing representation of the LGBTQ+ collective; that is, ‘who to love’ is not the only concern of present society, but also ‘how to love’. Henceforth, topics such as marriage, divorce, monogamy and polygamy are being discussed and negotiated.

Regarding marriage, it is undeniable that several significant changes have modified the understanding of such institution, however it is not all about differences, one can argue that some aspects have rather stayed the same. For instance, marriage has remained a form of social organization and recognition of ‘love’ (Evans 2003, 25; Grossi 2014, 29); and in spite of having detached marriage from its religious connotations, this institution, as argued by Diduck and Kaganas, is still considered to be “the ultimate commitment one can make to a sexual or emotional partner” (2012, 36). In fact, if this were not the case, then the legalization of homosexual marriage would have not been considered such a goal (Evans 2003, 25). Therefore, marriage is still “an institution grounded on romantic love” (Grossi 2014, 31). Nevertheless, this institution has changed in that it is no longer attached to its traditional religious connotations, becoming this way more ‘secular’ and ‘contractual’ (Grossi 2014, 26). Thus, marriage is not considered to be life-longing anymore, that is, divorce appears as an option for everyone who seems to be unsatisfied with their marriage; so, nowadays one has the right to finish their marriage as soon as it does not meet the personal expectations of one of the parts (Evans 2003).

The slow deconstruction on marriage has done away with values such as the ‘forever union’, and consequently, this institution has become more irrelevant. In fact, Fineman (2006) argued that the functions and goals that marriage is supposed to fulfil are not being met anymore within marriage, but rather, they are more likely to be fulfilled outside of it by other type of relationships: “less than a quarter of households are made up of married couples and their children” (Grossi 2014, 27); thus, the reality nowadays is that some changes have taken—and keep taking—place in the way people relate to each other.

Having rejected the concept of eternal oneness—quite characteristic of binary thinking—, present society and the current

construction of relationships keep on questioning this concept by opening up to new ways of relating to others, which defy the social mono-normativity. As explained by Rambukkana, monogamy is “something we [have been] stuck on: *loving only one way*” (2015, x). Non-monogamous relationships have been slowly developing since the 1990s, and it is currently still on the move (Klesse 2018). But, as previously mentioned, West society is still ruled and organized by the influence of the monogamous type of intimacy, mainly as a result of Catholic inheritance. In this regard, it is important to note that mono-normativity establishes a set of values on emotions. An instance could be jealousy; mainstream culture very usually represses and demonizes such feeling, as if the mere fact of experiencing it was something to feel ashamed of. Turning over to polyamorists, it is firstly necessary to make clear that they also experience jealousy at some point in their relationships, but instead of demonizing it, they “control, modify and channel” such emotion in order to normalize it (Klesse 2018, 1111); as argued by Deri, “[a]ccording to the polyamorous model, feeling any emotion is appropriate, but acting on that emotion should be tempered with grace” (2015, 30). Furthermore, there is an interesting concept named ‘compersion’, which was first coined by the San Francisco Kerista community (1971–1991), and it refers to “the feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloveds are expressing their love for one another” (quoted in Deri 2015, 32). Therefore, what can be noted is that by introducing and embracing new ways of relating to others, society starts to rewrite the new “rules of love” (Klesse 2018, 1114).

2.2. The 21st Century Ireland and the Question of Love

Now, focusing on the contemporary Irish scope, it is worth drawing attention to Ireland as a society recently “freed” from the traditional ruling power of Catholicism. Its decline is often attributed to different reasons, such as the membership in the European Union in 1973 and the subsequent ‘modernisation’ of the nation, the international women’s movement, or the significant economic growth of the late 20th century, known as the Celtic Tiger, which

contributed to the replacement of the homogenous white and Catholic Ireland with a more culturally diverse Irish society (Fine-Davis 2015). Furthermore, the 1990s clerical sex abuse scandals played a significant part in changing the Irish public opinion on the institution of the church.

As regards the Irish political panorama, the Irish population has “moved away from traditional politics”. Most people now “point to the rise of specific interest and identity politics—environmental, morality, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and so forth” (Inglis 2014, 104). Indeed, when it comes to social issues, the Irish society has been unquestionably active for the most recent years; and as a result of that, the Irish constitution has recently undergone some reforms that definitely differentiate it from the original version of 1937. In fact, Rooney’s novels reflect a completely advanced Irish society in that, as José Francisco Fernández stated, “gay couples no longer cause a stir” (2019, 272). Therefore, it is arguable that Rooney displays in her novels a contemporary Irish social background, which—among other social issues—is pushing forward towards LGBTQ+ matters.

Some of the latest and most meaningful achievements in Ireland have been the legalization of gay marriage in 2015, the legalization of abortion in 2018, and the liberalization of divorce laws in 2019. Now, as regards marriage and family formation, it is arguable that, in spite of the church’s decline and divorce legalisation in 1995, people have not undermined marriage, and there still exists an inclination to form families; however, family shapes have changed and, at present, “[t]here are as many different families in Ireland as there are individuals who make them [...] yet the notion of “the” family is invoked as if it meant the same thing to everybody” (Inglis 2014, 45). In this sense, it is notable that, as previously argued by Perel, the human need for connection has prevailed over years of changes, but certainly, ways of loving and relating have changed; in the case of Ireland, people still get married and have children, although, as stated by Inglis, not necessarily in that order. Nonetheless, there is a traditional and relevant factor that still seems to affect contemporary Irish families: alcoholism. As one of the major problems of public health in contemporary Ireland, it is usual to find the stereotypical figure of the alcoholic father of a

family in current Irish literature. In fact, in *Conversations with Friends*, Frances' parents are divorced because of that problem, and the reader is occasionally introduced to Frances' childhood memories being assaulted by her father when he came home drunk: "He hurled one of my school shoes right at my face once after he tripped on it. It missed and went in the fireplace [...] I learned not to display fear, it only provoked him. I was cold like a fish" (Rooney 2017, 49). This fact also proves that family has acquired different meanings in Ireland: "besides being a site for love and care, the family can also be a place of conflict, violence, and sexual abuse" (Inglis 2014, 55).

Having said that, the context of Rooney's novels appears to be much clearer, and it is therefore not surprising that Rooney is now depicting different non-traditional relationships between young protagonists, which break up with much of the conventions that have been accepted for many years. Indeed, and as she explained, she does not intend to "write a tract on what relationships of the future or even the present moment should look like", but rather she simply portrays "what they do look and feel like" (London Review Bookshop, 2019). In fact, in portraying affective relationships among young characters, she gives little importance to marriage and even criticises the nuclear family portraying it as a space that is hardly ever successful for her protagonists.

3. Methodology

A philosophical study on the representation of affective relationships will be carried out in order to deal with the representation of affective relationships in Sally Rooney's novels. In that sense, the most fundamental theory revolves around the concept of the 'undecidable', as an idea that the French philosopher Jacques Derrida first introduced as a threat to binary oppositions, a concept which, in turn, belongs to the structuralist way of thinking, and that he rejected as part of his contributions and theories (Derrida 2002).

In spite of all recent social changes, it is undeniable that the current social order still keeps many traits of the traditional one:

heterosexuality is still considered to be the norm—let alone monogamy—, plus all existing relationships should apply to the labels society has constructed so far: ‘friends’, ‘lovers’, ‘married’, ‘single’, etc; in this context, one can argue that those people whose intimacy and relations do not correspond to the normative ones, are bound to undergo difficult experiences and situations in the sphere of affectivity; but at the same time, this sphere is questioned and threatened by these non-normative types of intimacy. Thus, it can be noted that Western society is organized according to a certain order; this social order or understanding is characterized by the presence of binary oppositions, which according to Saussure are “the means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined in reciprocal determination with another term, as in binary code. It is not a contradictory relation but, a structural, complementary one” (Fogarty 2005); furthermore, the terms in an opposition are not equal, but rather, “one of the[m] [...] governs the other” (Derrida 1981, 41). In this context, the sphere of affectivity is not an exception, and it does not escape the influence of binarism; the structuralist thinking affects love relationships by reducing the possibilities in which two or more people can interact and construct bonds. For instance, in the single-married opposition, one can either stay single or get married, but not something in between. Therefore, the definitions of the two concepts participating in such a binary opposition are inherently dependent on the differences between them: everything that one term of the opposition is, dictates what the other is not (Collins and Mayblin 2012, 36); in the single-married opposition, the two terms depend on each other to acquire meaning, and everything that a single person can do, a married person cannot.

However, the reality of the relationships people have, very often escapes this binary order, and as explained by Rooney: “[w]e don’t have a way of speaking about these non-relationships, where someone is your friend but maybe you [sleep with them]. There is no accepted vocabulary for that. There is a vast array of ways of being with people that we don’t have the vocabulary to describe” (quoted in O’Regan 2017). That is, these ‘non-relationships’ remain unlabelled, they cannot take part of the binary social understanding and very often occupy the space between two binary concepts: “[t]hey slip across both sides of an opposition but don’t properly fit

either. They are more than the opposition can allow. And because of that, they question the very principle of ‘opposition’” (Collins and Mayblin 1993, 38). In turn, they become undecidable. Now, here is when the discussion of the concept ‘normal’ begins; it is clear that binarism has set what ‘normalcy’ is like: everyone should apply for one term of an opposition or the other, that is, whether someone is married or single, partners or friends, etc; and anything or anyone that steps out of the binary opposition, cannot be conceived as ‘normal’. In fact, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2010), ‘normal’ is something that “[conforms] to a standard; usual, typical or expected” (‘Normal’, Stevenson 2010); therefore, this definition sees itself related to that of ‘normative’, which is defined as something that “[derives] from a standard or norm, specially of behaviour” (‘Normative’, Stevenson 2010). In this sense, normativity is interwoven in normalcy.

Setting that aside, the very opposite concept to ‘normal’ or ‘normative’ is therefore ‘abnormal’ or ‘non-normative’, which can be translated into the Derridean philosophical scope as ‘undecidability’. In the words of Kristeva, this is ‘abjection’, it is what remains “radically excluded”, and it is “the place where meaning collapses” because “[i]t lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game” (1982, 2). The ‘abject’ is translated into the Derridean theories as the ‘undecidable’, and it arose from the effects that his theories had on traditional philosophy and Western thinking; Derrida’s philosophy was mostly considered to be a direct attack and critique to the traditional foundations of philosophy, questioning “the usual notions of *truth* and *knowledge*” and it even got to question “the *authority* of philosophy” (Collins and Mayblin 2012, 21). Nevertheless, the point of interest in creating an analogy with his philosophy is not to deepen in Derridean ideas itself, but on the effects that it had on society as a subversive and defying way of thinking which is contrary to traditional ways of structuring reality. That is why these effects can be thought of as analogous to those that the emergence of new types of relationships have on the traditional ones. It is argued that Derrida’s philosophy “works to legitimate space for the partial, the messy, the unfinished, the tentative” (Mansfield 2005, 29). It likewise calls into question the

very existence and authority of binary oppositions; and in so doing, he “heightens our awareness of the dangers of oppositional thinking [...] in Western metaphysics and the exclusionary ethics and practices that must result from such thinking” (Mansfield 2005, 37-38).

Thus, another important point to make is that the threat of the undecidable has always existed and has always been experienced, but the way it has been dealt with has been different; to take a literary example, in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist decided to move away from Mr Rochester after knowing that her relationship with him was doomed to ‘unmarriageability’ (Phillips 2008, 205), and in so doing, she was showing rejection to stay in a state of undecidability, since she would not be able to marry Mr Rochester, yet their relationship would be romantic. Hence, they would not fit either one term of the opposition–married–, nor the other–single–(Collins and Mayblin 2012).

However, it is in the present society that people are starting to acknowledge and tolerate the existence of the undecidable, and subsequently, defying and questioning the utility of binary thinking. This is why this article will approach Rooney’s novels from this perspective, since both *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends* present current affective relationships that display ‘new’ and unconventional ways of relating to others that, mostly, escape the binary way of thinking. The following analysis will, therefore, point out the concept of the undecidable within such relationships and the attitudes that it is dealt with, highlighting this way a social tendency towards binarism.

4. Analysis

In representing current Irish society in her novels, Rooney’s characters constantly subvert and deal with conventions that do not properly fit them anymore. In other words, even though maintaining unconventional relationships in a society that is still highly regulated by conventions is rather an uncomfortable experience, Rooney’s characters manage to, somehow, deal with it. In this light, the aspect to analyse is the existing social structure that defines–or at least,

attempts to define—the type of relationships constructed both in *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*.

To begin with, one of the most important aspects that characters in both novels try to implement is that of attaining ‘normalcy’ within their relationships, that is, to try and conventionalise them; characters try to have a ‘normal’ relationship, but to be more exact, what they actually want to have, is a normative relationship, that is, a relationship that fits the structuralist perspective, and subsequently, applies to binarism. For instance, in *Conversations with Friends*, at some point, Frances attempts to move away from her ‘abnormal’ relationship with Nick to try and start a more ‘normal’ one with another man she meets through a mobile app, and even if she does not feel quite convinced of what she is doing, she tries to persuade herself by thinking it is ‘normal’: “Afterwards he invited me back to his apartment and I let him unbutton my blouse. I thought: this is normal. This is a normal thing to do” (Rooney 2017, 208). The awkwardness of meeting someone via a mobile application does not appear for Frances to be as weird or unacceptable as constructing a relationship with a married man, given that her relationship with Nick would never allow her to get married or be single, their relationship is rather something in between.

It can be clearly seen that Frances’ wish is to conform to what society dictates as ‘normal’ rather than what she personally feels or thinks ‘normal’. In the case of *Normal People*, a significant example is when Connell starts a completely mono-normative relationship with Helen to demonstrate himself, but most importantly the rest of society, that his relationship was ‘normal’: “Helen is the first girlfriend he has introduced to his mother and he finds he’s curiously eager to impress on Lorraine how normal their relationship is” (Rooney 2018, 156). Thus, it is important to notice that using the word ‘normal’ in an attempt to refer to something normative naturalises, to some extent, social norms that have nothing to do with reality; for instance, monogamous relationships are the most ‘normal’ type of relationships nowadays, but as argued by Rooney herself, these do not “[reflect] people’s real experiences” (London Review Bookshop 2019). In other words, in the context of Rooney’s

works, the word ‘normal’ naturalises mono-normativity, or what Nathan Rambukkana called: “*loving only one way*” (2015, x) (original italics). In that sense, Rooney’s characters, as she argues, are actually ‘normal’ in that “nothing that happens to them is exceptional at all, everything that they undergo is just mundane” (London Review Bookshop 2019). However, the things they undergo, although mundane and banal, do not conform to the present narratives of normativity because they do not fit binarism. In that sense, normalcy—as displayed in Rooney’s novels—is much more related to normativity and binarism, and subsequently, to what can be expected, but it is much less related to what is usual or typical, given that monogamy, along history, “was never actually the reality of how people lived their lives, that is how we said we were living our lives, but it’s not reflected in people’s real experiences” (London Review Bookshop 2019).

Now, leaving aside the previous discussion, it is time now to look at the way in which characters deal with the undecidable in their relationships. As it was previously mentioned, there exists a tendency towards binarism, and this is exactly the attitude that Rooney reflects in her novels through some of her characters. To begin with, in *Normal People*, it is Connell the character that seems to crave for ‘normalcy’ the most, henceforth, he is also the character that tries the most to adapt his relationships to the social binary understanding, that is, he feels the necessity to escape the uncertainty that being in an ‘undecidable’ type of relationship carries. In fact, that is the reason why he starts dating Helen: “Connell thinks the aspects of himself that are most compatible with Helen are his best aspects: his loyalty, his basically practical outlook, his desire to be thought of as a good guy. With Helen he doesn’t feel shameful things, he doesn’t find himself saying weird stuff during sex”, and on the contrary, “Marianne had a wildness that got into him for a while and made him feel that he was like her, that they had the same unnameable spiritual injury, and that neither of them could ever fit into the world” (Rooney 2018, 169). Therefore, escaping from his relationship with Marianne was a form of escaping from ‘undecidability’ and adapting himself to the binary thinking. When he is with Helen, he is no longer uncertain about the nature of his relationship because it is socially thought to be

“normal, a good relationship. The life they were living was the right life” (170), and it becomes clear from the first moment he dates her that she is his girlfriend, whereas Marianne is never considered to be his girlfriend: “she was not even his ex-girlfriend. She was nothing.” (110) That is why the reader can find Connell wondering about his relationship with Marianne throughout the whole novel.

On another note, it is also interesting to see that the ‘undecidable’ state of Connell and Marianne’s relationship is not an inner issue, meaning that friends and family are also aware of the ‘strange’ relation they have; what is most important is that, far from just being aware of it and accept their relationship as it is, society tends to label it and make it fit in either one side of the opposition or another—romance or friendship:

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)

This scene is probably one of the most representatives of binary thinking, since Lorraine expresses the impossibility to understand a relationship that does not fit either romance nor friendship. Another character sharing this attitude is Helen:

It doesn’t have to be weird that she’s your ex, Helen said.

She’s not my ex. We’re just friends.

But before you were friends, you were...

Well, she wasn’t my girlfriend, he said.

But you had sex with her, though. (166)

Again, this dialogue represents how complex it is to understand Connell and Marianne’s relationship following the rule of binarism. In fact, the reader can easily notice that not even the protagonists can understand it.

This ‘undecidable’ type of relationship is also represented in *Conversations with Friends*, and it is Frances and Bobbi’s

relationship the one that usually stands in the middle of friendship and romance, it does not fit either one thing or the other, and it is also both things at the same time. At the beginning of the novel, it might seem that Bobbi is just a friend of Frances, however, their relationship turns out to be much more special—or complex—as the novel progresses. Just as in *Normal People*, Rooney represents a society that almost needs to make Bobbi and Frances’ relationship fit in either romance or friendship: “Marianne [a friend of Bobbi and Frances] saw us holding hands in college one day and said: you’re back together! We shrugged. It was a relationship, and also not a relationship” (303). Thus, it is again the same dilemma that Connell and Marianne from *Normal People* have to deal with. However, in the case of Bobbi, she seems to understand much more the nature of her relationship with Frances than Connell and Marianne understand their own. As a result of this, Bobbi is capable of tolerating and managing her relationship with Frances more easily. In fact, there are some scenes along the novel in which the reader gets to know about Bobbi’s clear ideas on her relationship with Frances:

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. (305-6)

At first, Bobbi’s ideas might seem quite radical, but still, chances are that there is some truth in what she says. Binary thinking supports and fosters what Bobbi describes as “prefabricated cultural dynamics” (306), given that people are to organize their relationships according to already existing labels; and if there is something that Rooney makes clear in both her novels is that the creation of genuine relationships with other people will hardly comply with all the rules that one label establishes for a certain type of relationship, henceforth, existing labels will hardly fit or represent the dynamic of every relationship. In this context, these state apparatuses are just a forced attempt to regulate a diverse society and turn it into a more uniform and homogeneous one: easier to control. This is why the ‘undecidable’ type of relationships

displayed in both novels represent a problem both for characters and society.

To finish this analysis, it is also worth noting that both novels have an open-end, meaning that the ‘undecidable’ cannot be solved by the end of both stories. Furthermore, it also represents the willingness of 21st century writers, such as Rooney, to cope with the unfinished and the uncertain, that is, to subvert the conventional and pave the way for a new mindset.

5. Conclusion

Overall, it may be said in the first place that, as can be seen in Rooney’s novels, the theme of ‘love’ and the construction of affective relationships are still two topics of interest for current authors as much as it was for authors from past centuries. This interest arises from the variability and changing aspect of the same. Previous conceptualisation of marriage presented marriage as the major and culminating representation of love; however, current writers, such as Rooney, see this institution as rather irrelevant or at least, not so meaningful.

Rooney has presented different issues to call into question, being mono-normativity one of the most significant ones. In that sense, she even reflects on how not only behaviour, but also feelings—especially that of jealousy—are extremely regulated—or even, to some extent, provoked – by social norms. Thus, she challenges the internalization of aspects concerning the way people relate to others; this is something she clearly portrayed at the end of *Conversations with Friends* when she writes: “Things and people moved around me, taking positions in obscure hierarchies, [...] [a] complex network of objects and concepts. You live through certain things before you understand them” (Rooney 2017, 321). In this way she highlights Frances’ little understanding or realization of her feelings and behaviour in terms of the norms that actually regulate them. In other words, Rooney attempts to represent conventions—such as monogamy—as a ‘network’ that characters assume and participate in without even knowing what is behind them.

In this context, it is interesting to also mention that Rooney, as a modern Irish author, represents the current situation of Ireland as a country and society that goes ahead with different social issues; in fact, it is arguable that this is the reason why Rooney's novels are not only well-known in Ireland, but also, these are internationally well-acclaimed, meaning that the themes she deals with are not only topics of interest for the Irish society, but also for the European society, in general.

Accordingly, it can be argued that the matters she presents regarding affective relationships are topical issues for controversial discussions, and possibly, in process of study and development for the next years. A reading of literature combining philosophy and its opportunities may facilitate a more in-depth understanding of how societies evolve and where the foundations of the same lie.

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Received: December 7, 2021

Revised version accepted: March 28, 2022

