

BETWEEN WORDS AND IMAGES: THE COMPLEX

DYNAMICS OF LOVE IN *NORMAL PEOPLE*

Amelia Nowicka

Nottingham Trent University

English (BA) Hons

N1206322@my.ntu.ac.uk

Abstract:

This article examines Sally Rooney's 'Normal People' in both its novel and television adaptation forms, highlighting the complexities of human relationships and the interplay of class, identity, and emotional connection. It focuses on how the narrative explores themes of communication and miscommunication, illustrated through key scenes such as Connell's hesitation to invite Marianne to the school dance, which reflects societal pressures. The television adaptation's visual storytelling enhances this exploration, particularly in the intimate moments shared between the characters, where the camera captures their emotional nuances. This analysis showcases how "Normal People" engages with literature and visual culture, inviting deeper empathy and connection from its audience.

Keywords:

Novel, Adaptation, Relationship, Television, Communication.

Sally Rooney's "Normal People," both as a novel and a television adaptation, shows the problems of human relationships, intimacy, and the social dynamics of contemporary life. The story of Connell and Marianne navigates themes of class, identity, and emotional connection, revealing how these elements are intertwined with the gaze—both literal and metaphorical. This article explores how "Normal People" reflects and interacts with literature and visual culture, emphasizing concepts of art, looking, seeing, and the gaze.

Normal People is a narrative that thrives on the difficulty of communication and miscommunication. Rooney's story is characterised by its unique style, which invites the readers to look beyond the surface of the 5 characters' interactions. One scene in the novel occurs when Connell hesitates to invite Marianne to the school dance, reflecting his internal conflict between desire and social acceptance. The novel's structure—interweaving perspectives and timelines—mirrors the broken nature of modern relationships. 'He probably won't come back, she thinks. Or he will differently'.¹ This narrative technique aligns with the idea of 'seeing' in literature, where understanding goes beyond simple

observation. The characters' internal struggles and emotional landscapes challenge readers to empathise and engage with their experiences, fostering a deeper connection that goes beyond the written word.

The Television adaptation of 'Normal People' showcases the gaze through its visual storytelling. For instance, in a key scene where Connell and Marianne share their first intimate moment in her home, the camera lingers on their hesitant yet longing glances, amplifying the emotional weight of the interaction. The series utilises close-ups and intimate framing to capture the nuances of Connell and Marianne's relationship. This visual approach allows viewers to witness the subtleties of their interactions—the fleeting glances, the silent pauses and the moments of vulnerability that are often lost in the traditional narrative forms. The camera becomes a participant in the gaze, inviting the audience to observe the characters in ways that evoke empathy and introspection. 'Marianne and Connell are often placed in a way that draws some separation between them and their environment'.² The adaptation highlights the importance of visual culture in understanding and interpreting the literary themes.

'Normal People' engages with the concept of the gaze in relation to societal expectations and self-perception. Marianne, in particular, struggles with visibility and

invisibility, navigating her identity within the confines of social hierarchies. A striking moment in the novel occurs when Marianne confronts Connell at a party, revealing her frustration with being overlooked and misunderstood. The adaptation captures this confrontation with intense close-ups that emphasise Marianne's vulnerability. The way she is perceived by others—and how she perceives herself—reflects broader themes of power dynamics within relationships. 'Marianne had the sense that her real life was happening somewhere very far away, happening without her, and she didn't know if she would ever find out where it was or become part of it'.³ The gaze becomes a tool for both empowerment and oppression, as characters navigate their desires and vulnerabilities in a world that often reduces them to stereotypes. Rooney's exploration of these themes resonates with feminist theories of the gaze, which interrogate how power structures shape the way individuals are seen and represented.

In addition to the personal dimensions of the gaze, 'Normal People' also engages with cultural and artistic representations of intimacy. The characters' experiences are shown by references to literature, music, and art, which serve as touchstones for their emotional journeys. For example, Connell's connection to literature is highlighted in scenes where he shares poetry with Marianne, creating a bridge between their emotional states. These references not only enrich the narrative but also situate Connell and Marianne within a broader cultural context. The act of looking—whether at art or

at one another—becomes a means of exploring identity, desire, and the complexities of human connection. It ‘explores how our individual psychologies shape the way we love and desire to be loved’.⁴ This interplay between literature and visual culture emphasises the importance of context in understanding personal narratives, revealing how external influences shape internal experiences.

The series draws attention to the significance of the visual in conveying emotional truth. ‘Most people go through their whole lives, without ever really feeling that close with anyone’.⁵ The cinematography captures the subtleties of body language and facial expressions, allowing viewers to ‘see’ the emotions often left unspoken in the dialogue. For instance, during a scene in which Connell and Marianne lie next to each other in bed, the silence between them speaks volumes; the tension and affection are palpable, conveyed through the characters’ subtle movements and expressions. This visual language complements Rooney’s text, creating a multi-layered experience that deepens the audience’s engagement with the characters. The ability to perceive and interpret emotions through visual cues enhances the narrative’s impact, illustrating how art and literature can come together to depict the human experience authentically. ‘Normal People is a captivating mirror. It reflects back to us the intensity, passion, anguish, and power of friendship on fire’.⁶

The cinematography in "Normal People" plays a crucial role in conveying the emotional depth and intimacy of Connell and Marianne's relationship. The series uses a variety of techniques, such as close-up shots and natural lighting, to create an intimate atmosphere that draws viewers into the characters' experiences. For instance, the use of lingering close-ups captures subtle facial expressions and body language, allowing audiences to feel the tension and vulnerability present in key moments, such as their first sexual encounter or emotionally charged conversations. ‘The cinematography is covert, only used to accentuate and elevate the emotions in the actors’ performances.’⁷ Additionally, the careful framing of scenes emphasizes the physical distance and emotional barriers between the characters. This visual storytelling enhances the narrative's exploration of love, longing, and the complexities of human connection, making the audience aware of the characters' internal struggles and desires.

The visual culture surrounding "Normal People" further amplifies these themes. The series ‘artfully uses mise-en-scène to evoke the characters' emotional landscapes.’ Settings, colours, and lighting choices to mirror the characters' internal states, enhancing the viewer's understanding of their struggles. For instance, the

contrast between the serene, rural landscapes of Connell's home and the cold, sterile environments of Marianne's upper-class world accentuates their differing experiences and the emotional distances that exist between them. 'Rob teases Connell by suggesting that Marianne must see him as her butler.'⁸ This visual storytelling reinforces the idea that our environments shape how we see ourselves and how we are seen by others, highlighting the interconnection of space, identity, and perception.

In addition to the cinematographic techniques, the series also utilizes music as a powerful tool to convey emotion and deepen the viewer's connection to the characters. The carefully curated soundtrack serves as a backdrop to key moments in Connell and Marianne's relationship, allowing the audience to experience their emotional highs and lows in an intuitive way. A particularly impactful moment occurs when a song plays during a scene of reconciliation, showcasing their emotional connection. Music becomes a form of communication that becomes words, echoing the themes of longing and desire that spread to the narrative. 'The use of music adds a grounded certainty to the emotions'.⁹ This integration of musical elements into the visual landscape emphasises the various nature of storytelling, revealing how different forms of art can come together to create a personal experience.

"Normal People" delves into the problems of intimacy and the challenges of vulnerability in relationships. The characters face their fears, insecurities, and the barriers that prevent them from fully connecting with one another. These themes resonate with contemporary discussions surrounding mental health and emotional well-being, highlighting the importance of open communication and understanding in fostering healthy relationships. The show uses Connell to depict the male experience with affection, depression, and vulnerability.¹⁰ By portraying the characters' struggles with intimacy, Rooney emphasizes that vulnerability is not a weakness but a necessary component of authentic human connection. This struggle is shown during a scene where Connell confesses his feelings to Marianne, revealing the depth of his emotional disturbance. This perspective encourages readers and viewers to reflect on their own relationships and the ways in which societal expectations shape their experiences of love and intimacy.

The exploration of the gaze within "Normal People" also invites a critical examination of the audience's role in interpreting the narrative. 'Normal people highlights the central theme of relationships and how they shape and define individual identity.'¹¹ As viewers, we are compelled to confront our biases and assumptions about the characters, questioning how our perceptions may be influenced by societal norms and expectations. This

self-reflexivity is a hallmark of contemporary literature and visual culture, prompting audiences to consider their own gaze and the power dynamics inherent in the act of looking. By engaging with these themes, "Normal People" challenges us to become more conscious of how we see and understand others, ultimately promoting a greater sense of empathy and awareness.

"Normal People" combines literature and visual culture, exploring themes of looking, seeing, and the gaze. Through its nuanced narrative and visual storytelling, the novel and its adaptation reflect the difficulties of

human relationships and the societal dynamics that shape them. Rooney's work invites readers and viewers to engage critically with the act of seeing—both in the context of personal relationships and within the broader cultural landscape. Ultimately, "Normal People" goes beyond the boundaries of its medium, offering a profound exploration of intimacy, identity, and the human connection in a contemporary world. By examining the interaction between literature and visual culture, we gain valuable insights into the ways in which our understanding of ourselves and others is shaped by the act of looking, seeing, and interpreting the world around us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Rooney, Sally. *Normal People*. New York: Hogarth, 2018.

Morris, Benjamin. 'Normal People creates an intimate visual language' 27 Apr. 2020
<https://nofilmschool.com/normal-creates-intimate-visual-language>

Chai, Howard. 'Normal People and How Our psychology shapes the way we love' 2020
<https://howard.chai.medium.com/normal-people-and-how-our-psychology-shapes-the-way-we-love>

Jankovic, Andjelika. 'Normal People—a mirror to you first love, or big love, or whatever you call that person you cannot forget' May 2020 <https://lifecurator.com>

Fenn, Archie. 'The subtle cinematography of Normal People' 2023 <https://film-school-dropouts.com>

Chai, Howard. 'Normal People and How Our psychology shapes the way we love' 2020
<https://howard.chai.medium.com/normal-people-and-how-our-psychology-shapes-the-way-we-love>

Quinlan, Caitlin. 'Where are we? Music and Memory in Normal People' 2020 <https://girlsontopstees.com>

De Miguel, Andres. 'Normal People's intimate depiction of masculinity' 2023 <https://theboar.org>

Michelle. 'Sally Rooney's Normal People 2019' <https://wordpress.com>

¹ Rooney, Sally, *Normal People*. New York: Hogarth, 2018. P.145

² Morris, Benjamin. 'Normal People creates an intimate visual language' 27 Apr. 2020
<https://nofilmschool.com/normal-creates-intimate-visual-language>

³ Rooney, Sally, *Normal People*. New York: Hogarth, 2018. P.75

⁴ Chai, Howard. 'Normal People and How Our psychology shapes the way we love' 2020
<https://howard.chai.medium.com/normal-people-and-how-our-psychology-shapes-the-way-we-love>

⁵ Rooney, Sally, *Normal People*. New York: Hogarth, 2018. P.263

⁶ Jankovic, Andjelika. 'Normal People—a mirror to you first love, or big love, or whatever you call that person you cannot forget' May 2020 <https://lifecurator.com>

⁷ Fenn, Archie. 'The subtle cinematography of Normal People' 2023 <https://film-school-dropouts.com>

⁸ Chai, Howard. 'Normal People and How Our psychology shapes the way we love' 2020
<https://howard.chai.medium.com/normal-people-and-how-our-psychology-shapes-the-way-we-love>

⁹ Quinlan, Caitlin. 'Where are we? Music and Memory in Normal People' 2020 <https://girlsontopstees.com>

¹⁰ De Miguel, Andres. 'Normal People's intimate depiction of masculinity' 2023 <https://theboar.org>

¹¹ Michelle. 'Sally Rooney's Normal People 2019' <https://wordpress.com>