

# HOW DOES THE 2020 TV ADAPTATION OF SALLY ROONEY'S *NORMAL PEOPLE* CAPTIVATE THE HIGHLY EMOTIVE LANDSCAPE USING ASPECTS OF VISUAL CULTURE?

**Hannah Mullin**

Nottingham Trent University

English BA Hons

N1256594@my.ntu.ac.uk

## **Abstract:**

Sally Rooney is a millennial, writer specializing in contemporary, Irish fiction. Many of her novels focus on the complexity of relationships and the intimacy between friends, family, and platonic lovers. Throughout this article I will be taking a particular focus on Rooney's second novel '*Normal People*' published in 2018. The book was later made into a TV series which aired in April 2020, during the first national lockdown. Rooney presents the theme of isolation as central to the psychological landscapes of both protagonists, Connell, and Marianne. This article will examine the transformation between novels into scripts, scrutinizing visual aspects and promoting the reliability which the TV show offers. From a visual perspective, many of Rooney's readers wanted the series to remain true to the book, enhancing the authenticity of her work. As someone who read the book first, I would argue the TV adaptation captivates the highly emotive relationship between both protagonists and the overwhelming sense of isolation which consumes so much of the novel. This invites the readership to both visually and emotionally engage with both versions of this heart-wrenching story.

## **Keywords:**

Sally Rooney, Relationships, Visuality, Emotive, Lovers.

Rooney sets her novel with the backdrop of Sligo- a rural

town in Northern Ireland. The novel later shifts to Dublin;

once Connell and Marianne move away for university.

The TV series visually conveys the two contrasting

landscapes, using both the rural and urban settings to

engage with the various emotions presented throughout

the novel. Connell and Marianne both attend the same

school in Sligo and experience pressures to keep their

relationship secret due to oppression of public influence.

Working-class Connell is seen as popular, and Marianne

is teased by Connell's friends and excluded from the

social sphere, '*She has no friends and spends her*

*lunchtimes alone reading novels*' (Rooney, 2018.)-

Marianne is isolated by her peers, illustrating the

importance of internal conflict which dominates so much

of the narrative. Towards the beginning scenes, Connell

and Marianne are constrained to a very isolated relationship, due to pressures from the public domain. In addition, the camera composition is used to reflect various aspects of their relationship. Hand-held cameras are used to create this sense of uncertainty, gently moving from side to side. In the article, *'The subtle cinematography of Normal People'* written by Archie Finn he speaks about *'The cinematography is covert, and like all good cinematography- is only used to accentuate and elevate the emotions in the actor's performances.'* (Finn, 2023) A lot of emotion from the novel is reflected by the cinematography of the TV show, enhancing the authenticity of the drama and visually engaging Rooney's original readership.

The actor playing Marianne is Daisy- Edgar Jones who successfully portrays Rooney's interpretation of the deep-rooted psychological conflict which is poignant throughout the novel. Marianne also suffers from abuse at home, engaging in a harmful understanding of intimacy, inflicted by the abuse she encounters from her older brother Alan. He emotionally and verbally abuses

Marianne, *'If you go crying 'When she tried to laugh him off, he grabbed her by the arm, whirled her around and spit in her face'* (Rooney, 2018), depicting the ruthless conflict to which Marianne is victim too. Daisy uses her body language to shrink in his presence, hunching her shoulders over to emphasize her brother's intimidation. In the journal, *'Literacy Fiction from the perspective of Romance: Normal People'* talks about *'The camera lingers on the faces of Daisy Edgar- Jones, capturing tiny shifts in their expressions, flickers on their eyes, like so many visual clues to what is going on inside their characters.'* In this scene, Daisy is coincidentally focusing her eyeline downwards, emphasizing the harmful elements of her character. This acting aligns so carefully with the tainted self-identity Rooney displays with her protagonist.

Equally, Paul Mescal demonstrates a visually, authentic portrayal of Connell Waldron. Towards the beginning of the novel, Rooney's interpretation implies him to be insecure and shy, hiding himself behind his social status. Rooney also illustrates Connell's love of books,

suggesting he finds reading a real source of comfort and escapism from the outside world. In the TV show, Marianne and Connell share their first kiss in Marianne's front room, Connell leans towards her whilst clutching a book. The cameras are narrowly focused onto both protagonists, highlighting the intimacy between them at this moment. From a visual perspective, this allows us to emphasize both characters, allowing us to watch their journey. Thus, these visual motifs appear throughout the show, using this camera technique to solidify a peak in their relationship, whereby they can be predominantly focused in that moment rather than being concerned with the outside world. In an article written by *Irish Studies Review*,<sup>2</sup> Barros- Del Rio outlines '*Importance of this aspect of watching TV for the understanding of the meaning and social impact of television texts*'- (pp. outlining the success of the TV show and how it authentically brings Rooney's characters to life.

The TV adaptation of *Normal People* launched in 2020, during the lockdown of the COVID 19 pandemic. Both actors were relatively unknown, preserving Rooney's vision to uphold her character's as '*Normal People*.' We became invited to engage with the complexities of young

people attempting to navigate adult life. The global pandemic meant that nations were forced to self-isolate, inhabiting an almost perfect environment to watch a complicated story about first love. Many people were touched by this TV show; it was one of the most popular dramas watched during this difficult time. The producers gave us both seaside and city backdrops, a simple yet delicate script; all contributing to creating a visually engaging drama, touching the lives of so many.

Strategically, Rooney uses silence between her two protagonists to structure a level of miscommunication between them. During the second break up of Connell and Marianne, nothing is ever officially discussed, they depart ways by saying '*I guess you want to see other people or...*' (Rooney 2018) and Marianne responds with, '*I guess so yeah.*' (Rooney 2018.) Rooney's use of limited speech is accurately reflected in the TV show, as Connell and Marianne often share a look which solidifies a frustrating glimpse of misjudgments. In the article, '*The First Great Millennial Author*', written by Cain in 2018,<sup>3</sup> she writes '*On some occasions, silence signifies a refusal to conform, while implying resistance, may lead to marginalization*' (Cain 2018) - captivating a real sense of

isolation, which was a feeling very close to home for people throughout the global lockdown. The article also states, [108] ‘But *Normal People* make being young a drama of universal significance’- suggesting Rooney’s characters have the ability to resonate with so many young people across the globe. Arguably, the drama upholds Rooney’s reputation as a millennial author, accurately depicting the complexities of navigating post-teen life. As the readership, we are invited to visually engage with this global feeling of alienation, portrayed so authentically in both adaptations.

Rooney also places a sharp vision on the importance of social class framed throughout this narrative. Rooney can be identified as a Marxist, as her novel speaks openly about the wounding effects of capitalism. In an interview named- ‘Sally Rooney on Transforming Life into novels’ she speaks about <sup>4</sup> ‘How Class as a very broad social structure impacts our lives’ - outlining her belief that class plays a huge part in social divisions that occur in the society around us. There is a clear town and city divide, meaning many young people leave their hometowns to search for a better education amongst urban centers. In the article... speaks about <sup>5</sup> ‘She has often complained about

*the impact of post-celtic crisis in Irish society, and how it hinders young people in their search for independence*’ (Baros Del- Rio 2022) - outlining Rooney’s motives to promote the importance of youth identity throughout her literature. This delicate dynamic of contemporary capitalism places pressure throughout the narrative, as Rooney visually captures the cultural landscape surrounding both the protagonists. There is a clear shift between the small town of Sligo where Connell and Marianne first meet, to then attending Trinity College Dublin, a predominantly middle-class institution, whereby Marianne is suddenly the one to flourish. Rooney delicately displays the ruthless class dynamics as Connell begins to feel severely out of place, ‘Now he has a sense of invisibility, nothingness, with no reputation to recommend him to anyone’ (Rooney, 2018.) Rooney never attempts to condemn middle-class privilege, instead she hopes for people to acknowledge the harmful isolation it can preserve. In an article written by Kate McCaughey, she examines how <sup>6</sup> ‘*Normal People* doesn’t condemn the middle-class character’s necessarily; it condemns the isolating and sometimes unkind world that they live in, be it knowingly or not’ (McCaughey 2020). McCaughey

attempts to point out the middle-class ignorance which surrounds this novel, contributing to both protagonists' fragile state of mind. The article also notices several visual elements, "The series uses props and set perfectly summarizes its portrayal of wealth and the wealthy. Marianne's family home in Sligo is modern and spotless; unfeeling and arrogant." - illustrating the vital class divisions which center so much of the novel. Structurally, the drama displays Connell and Marianne's first meeting to occur in Marianne's mansion, with Connell picking up his mother Lorraine who is hired as a cleaner. Their relationship becomes very much bounded by the social context in which they meet, immediately establishing the importance of social status which centers Rooney's narrative. This allows us to see the visual value of outside factors, demonstrating both the internal and external going hand in hand. This concept is so apparent in Rooney's writing as she writes so much from a Marxist perspective; demonstrating the importance of class boundaries which shape the dynamic of both characters. The show displays such powerful themes, yet always in an authentic and completely reliable way. As the audience we become invited to engage in the highly emotive sex

life between Connell and Marianne. Their feelings are depicted with such intensity- preserving Rooney's depiction of an accurate first love. The first time Connell and Marianne have sex, Connell repeatedly says 'we can stop at any time,' (Rooney, 2018) letting Marianne know this is a shared consensual experience. From an audience perspective, this becomes a very touching moment as it so perfectly captivates the awkward reality of two teenagers having sex for the first time. In the article, 'Normal People: A Visual Triumph, Recognizing that its Ok not to be Ok, points out'<sup>7</sup> 'The feelings for one another appear so intense and real, and the way their bodies move together is a visual delight on the eyes', demonstrating the power of sexual attraction and how raw their feelings are, making it so relatable to watch as viewers at home. The TV show widely attracted a younger audience, this scene allows teenagers to understand the importance of safe sex; and the emotive value which a relationship should bring. Overall, Rooney's novel engages with many aspects of visual culture which are directly applied to the TV show. Were invited to watch the protagonist's journeys in a beautiful yet authentic way, offering Rooney's readership

a completely accurate depiction of this coming-of-age

novella.

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