

TRANSACTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND SCHIZOPHRENIA IN *MR SALARY* BY SALLY ROONEY

RELACIONES TRANSACCIONALES Y ESQUIZOFRENIA EN *MR SALARY*, DE SALLY ROONEY

Mariana BOLFARINE

Instituto de Ciências Humanas e Sociais

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE RONDONÓPOLIS (UFR) | Rondonópolis, Brasil

Contact: mariana.bolfarine@ufr.edu.br

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-3342-2547

Abstract

This study aims at investigating Sally Rooney's short story *Mr Salary* (2019). The complexities around human relationships have always interested Rooney, who asserted that "there is a shared knowledge that relationship forms of the past were not actually suited for everyone" (London Review Bookshop, 2019: 16:11). This is especially true considering the "cultural moment where certainties around relationships have deteriorated slightly" (London Review Bookshop, 2019: 17:17). In this regard, my analysis will develop under two key points. The first is Rooney's depiction, in *Mr Salary*, of transactional relationships between the two protagonists, Sukie and Nathan, and between Sukie and her father, Frank, in the face of the economic changes brought about by the Celtic Tiger and post-Crash periods in Ireland. To make this point I will resort to the works of Barros del Río (2022), Carregal Romero (2023), among others. The second point will focus on issues related to language, silence and (hindered) communication among the characters in *Mr Salary* by means of Fredric Jameson's (1983) notion of schizophrenia, not in the clinical sense, but as a tool derived from cultural theory. According to Jameson,

Resumen

Este estudio tiene como objetivo investigar el cuento *Mr Salary* (2019), de Sally Rooney. Las complejidades en torno a las relaciones humanas siempre han interesado a Rooney, quien afirmó que "existe un conocimiento compartido de que las formas de relación del pasado no eran realmente adecuadas para todos" (London Review Bookshop, 2019: 16:11, mi traducción). Esto es especialmente cierto si tenemos en cuenta el "momento cultural, cuando las certezas en torno a las relaciones se han deteriorado ligeramente" (London Review Bookshop, 2019: 17:17, mi traducción). En este sentido, mi análisis se desarrollará bajo dos puntos clave. El primero es la representación que hace Rooney, en *Mr Salary*, de las relaciones transaccionales entre los dos protagonistas, Sukie y Nathan, y entre Sukie y su padre, Frank, ante los cambios económicos provocados por los periodos del Tigre Celta y del *post-Crash* en Irlanda. Para abordar este punto recurriré a las obras de Barros del Río (2022), Carregal Romero (2023), entre otros. El segundo punto se centrará en cuestiones relacionadas con el lenguaje, el silencio y la comunicación (obstaculizada) entre los personajes de *Mr Salary* mediante la noción de esquizofrenia de Fredric Jameson (1983), no en el sentido clínico, sino como una herramienta de la teoría cultural.

* Currently part of the Postgraduate Program in Languages of the Federal University of Mato Grosso

a consequence of global capitalism (as with schizophrenia) is a breakdown of the relationship between signifiers in language—which change the individual’s perception of time trapping them in an eternal present. My analysis will be directed at the way in which Sukie, the protagonist and first-person narrator, undergoes a process that enables her to move away from this eternal present and look into a future of new choices and possibilities.

Según Jameson, una consecuencia del capitalismo global (como ocurre con la esquizofrenia) es la ruptura de la relación entre los significantes en el lenguaje, fractura que cambia la percepción del tiempo del individuo atrapándolo en un eterno presente. Mi análisis se dirigirá al modo en que Sukie, la protagonista y narradora en primera persona, experimenta un proceso que la habilita para distanciarse de este eterno presente y para mirar hacia un futuro de nuevas alternativas y posibilidades.

Keywords: *Interpersonal relations*||*Silence in literature*||*Schizophrenia and the arts*||*Semiotics*||*Rooney, Sally*||*Irish literature*

Palabras clave: *Relaciones interpersonales*||*Silencio en la literatura*||*Esquizofrenia y las artes*||*Semiótica*||*Rooney, Sally*||*Literatura irlandesa*

“In chronic leukaemia, the cells can mature partly but not completely,’ the website said. These cells may look fairly normal, but they are not.”

—SALLY ROONEY (2019)

Introduction

Sally Rooney is a considerably recent phenomenon in Irish literature. Deemed by critics a contemporary Jane Austen, her narratives revolve around her own generation—the millennials—from the Irish perspective of the “post-Crash” period after the failed economic boom, known as the Celtic Tiger (Bolfarine, 2023). The characters in her writings are asking big questions about what it means to be human, which do not feel particularly attached to the technological age (Suchodolski, 2019). That is why her narratives easily conform to what we recognize as Austenian; falling in love, growing up, and finding one’s place in the world have always been excruciating experiences, “even if we happen to also be on Facebook while we’re thinking about it” (Suchodolski, 2019).

Born in 1991 in Castlebar, County Mayo, Ireland, Rooney earned a degree in English at Trinity College Dublin, where she competed as a member of the school’s debate team and was the number one competitive debater in Europe at age 22, which

she describes in the essay “Even if you beat me” (2015). Her short stories and essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *The White Review*, *The Dublin Review*, *The Stinging Fly*, among others. Her first novel, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), was followed by *Normal People* (2018), which achieved wide critical acclaim. Both were adapted for the screen by the Irish filmmaker Lenny Abrahamson. *Beautiful World Where Are You* came out in 2021, and her most recent novel, *Intermezzo* (2024), has just been published. She was the winner of the Sunday Times/ PFD Young Writer of the Year Award and shortlisted for the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award for *Mr Salary*, which first came out in *Granta 135: New Irish Writing* in 2016 and was later published as an e-book by Faber & Faber in 2019.

Sally Rooney’s novels have become popular outside and within academia as research objects of dissertations and articles in academic journals. The present study aims at analyzing the short story *Mr Salary*, which has not received much scholarly attention, but which deserves to be examined in that it anticipates themes that would also be present in her future work. The complexities of human relationships have always interested Rooney, who asserted that “there is a shared knowledge that relationship forms of the past were not actually suited for everyone” (London Review Bookshop, 2019: 16:11), especially considering the “cultural moment where certainties around relationships have deteriorated slightly” (London Review Bookshop, 2019: 17:17). In this regard, this study suggests that *Mr Salary* encapsulates the way in which the economic changes brought about by the Celtic Tiger and post-Crash periods in Ireland affect and change human relationships, particularly those between men and women.

For this purpose, I will structure my line of reasoning around two key points. The first is Rooney’s depiction of transactional relationships between the two protagonists, Sukie and Nathan, and between Sukie and her father, Frank, in the face of the economic changes brought about by the Celtic Tiger and post-Crash periods in Ireland. The second is Fredric Jameson’s (1983) notion of schizophrenia and its impact on language, which interferes with one’s notion of the passing of time as a consequence of global capitalism. The theoretical framework is comprised by Jameson’s “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in dialogue with work published on Rooney’s oeuvre, such as Barros del Río (2022), Carregal Romero (2023), among others.

Sally Rooney and Literature in Post-Crash Ireland

In order to comprehend the way in which *Mr Salary*'s main characters Sukie and Nathan's relationship is constructed, it is worth considering the historical backdrop of the story, for the society Rooney writes about is, to a certain extent, a response to the Ireland of the past. The recently founded Republic of Ireland, governed by the President Eamon de Valera, was distinguished by the moral oppression of women by the Catholic Church, which exalted the nuclear family and the repression of sexual desires (Ferriter, 2004). It was only in 1960 that the Prime Minister, Taoiseach Séan Lemass, devised the economic development plan that opened Ireland's economy to foreign companies and investment. In 1973, Ireland joined the European Union, yet it was only between 1995-2000 and 2004-2008 that Ireland experienced a rapid economic growth, fueled by foreign capital, which became known as the Celtic Tiger years. Although it did not last long, this was a turning point in Ireland's history.

At the turn of the century, however, a property speculation crisis erupted, peaking in 2008. Property prices rose rapidly, making those who had invested unable to pay their mortgages (Ferriter, 2004). Over the next 18 months, Ireland faced an economic recession; the private construction sector collapsed, resulting in empty houses and abandoned buildings (Gray, Geraghty and Ralph, 2019) that serve as the backdrop for passages in Sally Rooney's novel *Normal People*. The recovery in 2014, known as the post-Crash period, prompted the precariousness of jobs, difficulty to obtain mortgages to buy property, and an increase in rents. There is still a housing shortage in Dublin, resulting in people—and even families—being forced to move to farther neighborhoods. The crisis also brought a setback in terms of the social and financial maturity of young people, as one third of those aged between 18 and 34 continue to live with their parents or in remote locations with lower rents, which forces many of them to commute (Gray, Geraghty and Ralph, 2019).

These economic transformations have also prompted social changes, such as the deinstitutionalization of matrimony and the breakdown in the order—and necessity—of the stages that culminate in marriage and parenthood, making gender relations more flexible with women remaining in the labor market after motherhood. Furthermore, there was growing individualization, as “families of choice” replaced “families of destiny” (Gray, Geraghty and Ralph, 2019).

A decade after the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, post-Crash Ireland was marked by literature written by men and women who came of age after the economic boom. According to María Amor Barros del Río (2022), Irish authors have been raising questions about “political agency and identity,” reflecting upon “the precarity of individual life in the face of national and planetary challenges” (Barros del Río, 2022: 177). She also highlights that Irish women’s writing “has become a platform against the excesses of the Celtic Tiger boom and bust” (Barros del Río, 2022: 177). Some examples of post-Crash writers are Eimear McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2014), Lisa McInerney’s *The Glorious Heresies* (2015), Mike McCormack’s *Solar Bones*, and, of course, Sally Rooney, who has been designated a millennial writer writing about her own generation (Cain, 2019).

Regarding *Normal People*, Cain (2019) has written that:

[it] is a quiet, literary novel—but it is a zeitgeist novel too. It’s hard not to emerge from Rooney’s book about two young people navigating adulthood in post-crash Ireland and the sense that, somehow, the author has spotted something intangible about our time and exposed it. Like other zeitgeist novels, [...] *Normal People* has trapped a moment—in this case, our new sense of collective precariousness—whether individual, economic, or political. (Cain, 2019)

Nevertheless, in an interview in the *Irish Times* (2019), Rooney claims that she does not speak for a larger group: “I certainly never intended to speak for anyone other than myself. Even myself I find hard to speak for. My books may as well fail as artistic endeavors, but I don’t want them to fail for failing to speak for a generation for which I never intended to speak in the first place” (Sudjic, 2019). Issues such as “job insecurity, exorbitant rents, instant messaging, and casual sex coexist with different forms of physical violence, conflictive family relationships, and a strong sense of not belonging, class, and privilege” (Barros del Río, 2022: 177). These themes permeate Rooney’s work and enable the recognition that the experience of the crisis was not the same for everyone.

In Rooney’s novels, there are always characters undergoing financial difficulties, as is the case with Connell, who lives with his single mother Lorraine in *Normal People*, and Frances in *Conversation with Friends*, who must cope with friends and acquaintances from more privileged backgrounds than her. There are also characters

who are fleeing from dysfunctional households, chiefly abusive and alcoholic fathers, which is the case of Marianne in *Normal People* and Frances in *Conversations with Friends*. Similar themes are also present in the short story *Mr Salary*, which deals with homelessness, financial difficulties, families of choice, and complexities around love and death. That said, in the section that follows, I will focus on the way in which, in *Mr Salary*, social class shapes human relationships, which become determined by monetary and affective transactions. However, these relationships are unequal in the sense that the wealthy part will deal out the cards.

Mr Salary and Sukie: A Transactional Relationship

Mr Salary begins at Dublin's airport. Sukie, the protagonist and first-person narrator, is flying in from Boston with an "ugly" suitcase, which she carried "with a degree of irony," unwashed hair, and "black leggings with a hole in one knee" (Rooney, 2019 3). She is being picked up by Nathan, an older man in good shape, whom the reader soon perceives is her love interest. It is Christmas time, and Sukie decided to come home to visit her father, who is in the final stages of leukemia. Behind a relatively simple plot lie the complexities of two people navigating life and relationships in twenty-first century Ireland. In terms of form and style, *Mr Salary* features traits that are recurrent in Sally Rooney's narratives, such as the absence of inverted commas as dialogue markers, short and concise sentences, and an introspective narrative.

The reader soon learns that Sukie's mother had died in childbirth and that she is a victim of neglect from her father, whom she called by his first name: "Frank had problems with prescription drugs. During childhood I had frequently been left in the care of his friends, who gave me either no affection or else so much that I recoiled and scrunched up like a porcupine" (Rooney, 2019: 6). Sukie has grown estranged from Frank and their relationship seems to be driven by financial interest and manipulation: "Frank liked to call me up and talk to me about my late mother, whom he informed me was 'no saint'. Then he would ask if he could borrow some money. In my second year of college we ran out of savings and I could no longer pay rent, so my mother's family cast around for someone I could live with until my exams were over" (Rooney, 2019: 6).

Like in most Sally Rooney's novels, in *Mr Salary*, as the title indicates, there are money issues at work. Not only does Frank leave his daughter homeless, but he also tries to borrow money from her. Therefore, a transactional relationship is established between Frank and Sukie. It is, however, a one-way relationship from which Sukie does not get anything in exchange. In spite of this, Sukie had just flown in from Boston, where she was attending graduate school, to visit father: “I graduated way past the booklets they printed for sufferers and onto the hard medical texts, online discussion groups for oncologists, and PDFs of recent peer-reviewed studies. I wasn't under the illusion that this made me a good daughter, or even that I was doing it out of concern for Frank” (Rooney, 2019: 8). Sukie explains that she did not learn all she could about her father's cancer because she was concerned about him, which makes her seem cold and detached. Conversely, this seems to have changed when she met Nathan, whose older sister was married to an uncle of hers, and she eventually moved in with him since she had no family in Dublin. She was nineteen and he was thirty-four. He worked with consumer responsiveness, a well-paid job, and “had a beautiful two-bedroom apartment where he lived alone with a granite-topped kitchen island.” (Rooney, 2019: 9).

In contrast to Sukie's father's nonchalance, Nathan was generous by letting her move in and expressed affection by buying her gifts and taking her to expensive restaurants: “We went for lunch on Suffolk Street and put all our luxurious paper gift bags under the table. He let me order sparkling wine and the most expensive main course they had.” (Rooney, 2019: 9-10). This reveals that an unequal relationship is established between them in terms of class. While Nathan is older and wealthy, Sukie is younger and financially vulnerable. Nathan appears to be fine with this, while Sukie craves proper connection and commitment: “Nathan's physical closeness had a sedative effect on me, and as we moved from shop to shop, time skimmed past us like an ice skater” (Rooney, 2019: 9).

It is clear from the beginning that Sukie loves Nathan. She praised his good looks and admitted she smelled his aftershave at the drugstore on a bad day. At the airport, he asked if she had any news, like a new tattoo, and made a joke about getting married and that his fiancée was pregnant, which made Sukie turn her “face back to stare at the windshield. The red brake lights of the car in front surfaced through the ice

like a memory” (Rooney, 2019: 5). Nonetheless, they both express affectionate feelings for each other, albeit in different ways, but their relationship remained unresolved. Nathan tells her he loves her but cannot be with her neither romantically nor sexually.

Mr Salary is an insightful epithet created by Frank to refer to Nathan, for, like the relationship between father and daughter, there is also a transactional nature that defines the relationship between Sukie and Nathan:

You’re like your mother, Frank said. I stared at him. I felt my body begin to go cold, or perhaps hot. Something happened to the temperature of my body that didn’t feel good. What do you mean? Oh, you know what kind of person you are. Do I? You’ve got it all under control, said Frank. You’re a cool customer. We’ll see how cool you are when you’re left on your own, hmm? Very cool you might be then. (Rooney, 2019: 12)

In Frank’s view, Nathan, or Mr Salary, resembles an employer. He profits from her affection and the feeling of being loved, and in return, he buys her things. Rooney is renowned for her depiction of relationships that challenge the “family cell,” which, according to Kathryn Conrad, is the only “‘natural’ and fundamental unit group” in Irish society (Conrad, 2004: 21-22). The lavish dinners, the expensive hats and coats, the uneaten takeout, etcetera, allude to an excess, a feeling of waste of money, of food, of unwanted things and leftovers.

According to Barros del Río (2022), “at the same time, her novel expands into the collective dimension of growing up in a neoliberal context, characterised by commodification and consumerism, liminality and instability, also common to other western cultures” (178). In this regard, Barros del Río explains, “the current moment in Irish women’s writing has become a platform against the excesses of the Celtic Tiger boom and bust” (177), and this is precisely what is at play in *Mr Salary*—a critique of the commodification of relationships that takes place among such excesses. Sukie herself seems to be just one more item that can be bought, used and discarded whenever he feels like it.

Nathan expresses affection for Sukie when he buys her plane ticket as a “favour” for her to come to Dublin to see her dying father at Christmas. He carries her “ugly suitcase,” takes her to the hospital, and expects a call back to pick her up. And even though he does not seem to have another love interest and only occasionally has sex

with other women, he does not make up his mind to be with Sukie. Their relationship is mostly transactional: “I was only supposed to stay until I finished my exams that summer, but I ended up living there for nearly three years. My college friends worshipped Nathan and couldn’t understand why he spent so much money on me. I think I did understand, but I couldn’t explain it” (Rooney, 2019: 6).

Nonetheless, Sukie has also profited from this transactional relationship. According to Barros del Río (2022), “[i]n neoliberal economies, Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland included, economic contraction resulted in repolarization of class and gender, both in discourse and representation, with a marked regressive orientation” (177). “These trends,” Barros del Río continues, “have affected female sexual behavior, which, according to Susanne Lettow, has incorporated different forms of subjection” (177). Due to lack of choice, Sukie subjected herself to Nathan, but she also earned her part in the transaction, for she did not pay rent, nor food and was pampered by Mr Salary. However, the love she expected from him never came. They had only kissed once after being drunk coming home from a party, which he considered a mistake. Therefore, the transactional relationship between Sukie, a young woman facing her father’s terminal illness, and Nathan, a financially stable and unwilling to commit man, leads Sukie to a position of vulnerability and subjection.

Silence, Time, and Schizophrenia in *Mr Salary*

In this section, I will explore the way in which Sukie and Nathan’s choices (or lack thereof) are shaped by the neoliberal effects of the Celtic Tiger and post-Crash Ireland by means of Fredric Jameson’s (1983) conception of *schizophrenia* and its impacts on language. In *Mr Salary*, language (or the lack of it) becomes an impediment for effective communication. José Carregal Romero explains that neoliberalism informs Rooney’s “protagonists’ erratic and unstable behavior,” for it “fails to provide an ‘ethical outlook’ on one’s and others ‘immense suffering’”. This suffering “becomes intensified by silence and miscommunication, and the writer highlights the chasm between her characters’ social and private selves” (Carregal Romero, 2023: 214). The reason for this is that “in an age of self-branding and constant self-projection, all this [is] amplified by an omnipresent Internet culture affecting human interaction” (Carregal

Romero, 2023: 214). Rooney's characters are left to "struggle with emotional intimacy," for "their relationships become affected by neoliberal constraints like class-based distinctions and prejudice, as well as gender and sexual hierarchies often established through self-objectification" (Carregal Romero, 2023: 214).

According to Angela Woods (2011), the term *schizophrenia* has been appropriated by cultural theorists in a sense far more removed from the clinical diagnosis, extending its potential to illustrate contemporary subjectivity *per se*. Frederic Jameson's (1983) notion of *schizophrenia* is based on the ideas of the French philosopher Jacques Lacan, who considered it a language disorder—the breakdown of the relationship between signifiers—which is related to how individuals perceive time:

For Lacan, the experience of temporality, human time, past, present, memory, the persistence of personal identity over months and years—this existential or experiential feeling of time itself—is also an effect of language. It is because language has a past and a future, because the sentence moves in time, that we can have what seems to us a concrete or lived experience of time. (119)

In this regard, Jameson (1983) elucidates schizophrenics lack language articulation, which leads to a perpetual present with little connection to past moments and no foreseeable future:

I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism. [...] I will only be able, however, to show this for one major theme: namely the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterate traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve. (125)

The schizophrenic experience, according to Jameson (1983), is one of isolation, "with disconnected material signifiers that fail to link into a coherent sequence" (Jameson, 1983: 119), for personal identity "depends on our sense of the persistence of the 'I' and the

‘me’ over time” (Jameson, 1983: 119). In addition, according to Jameson, schizophrenia heightens the intensity of the experience of being in the world. This intensification of familiar surroundings is perceived as loss and hallucination causing a profound change in perception, such as a feeling of unreality or disintegration. In *Mr Salary*, this can be noticed in the passage in which Sukie takes a hot shower after arriving from the airport. The way she describes her feelings remounts to Jameson’s theory:

The next morning after my shower, I stood, letting my hair drip onto the bath mat, checking visiting hours on my phone. Frank had been moved to the hospital in Dublin for inpatient treatment after contracting a secondary infection during chemotherapy. He had to get antibiotics on a drip. Gradually, as the steam heat in the bathroom dissipated, a fine veil of goosebumps rose up over my skin, and in the mirror, my reflection clarified and thinned until I could see my own pores. (Rooney, 2019: 8)

At first, Sukie could not see her reflection. As the steam lifted, she looked in the mirror as if she were zooming into a picture, magnifying herself to the point in which what is left are fragments of her body. Instead of her face, it is her pores that she sees, as if she is looking beyond her “self,” like an impressionistic painting whose complete object of representation is seen as whole when the observer is standing afar, but when seen from up close, one is left gazing at brush marks that evince the fragmentation of the whole. Sukie’s experience of this heightened awareness of her body might be alluding to her sense of fragmentation in the face of the end of her father-daughter dysfunctional family.

In terms of language, something similar occurs in the way in which Sukie’s relationship to Frank is perceived by his mother:

Whenever I saw her, she told me I was the apple of her son’s eye, in those exact words. She had fastened on to this phrase, probably because it so lacked any sinister connotation. It would have been equally applicable to me if I had been Nathan’s girlfriend or his daughter. I thought I could place myself pretty firmly on the girlfriend-to-daughter spectrum, but I had once overheard Nathan referring to me as his niece, a degree of removal I resented. (Rooney, 2019: 8)

There is no exact referent to signify Nathan's relationship to Sukie. The "apple of one's eye" could be replaced by "the daughter," "the girlfriend," "the niece," and so on, even though these signifiers carry different senses of meaning. She might have resented less being referred to as the girlfriend rather than the niece, which implies a more "removed" status.

Communication also is hindered in *Mr Salary* when characters chose to keep silent when they could have tried to find the words to express their feelings. According to Carregal Romero (2023), Rooney uses "silence as a structuring and stylistic device to emphasize the shortcomings and failures of neoliberal culture" (215). In *Mr Salary* instead of speaking, characters communicate through gestures. This is evident in this excerpt in which Nathan and Sukie were watching TV:

I got onto the couch beside him and closed my eyes while he reached over to touch my hair. We used to watch films together like that, and he would touch my hair in that exact way, distractedly. I found his distraction comforting. In a way I wanted to live inside it, as if it were a place of its own, where he would never notice I had entered. I thought of saying, I don't want to go back to Boston. I want to live here with you. But instead I said: Put the sound back on if you're watching it; I don't mind. (Rooney, 2019: 20)

As soon as Sukie had arrived from the hospital and as she entered the living room, Nathan hit the mute button. There is a moment of silent intimacy between them, as they are close and he touches her hair. She describes his distraction while touching her hair as "comforting". For Sukie, Nathan is a safe place; she wants to live "inside" him. She wants to say she would like to stay with him in Ireland, but she initially remains silent about it. To Carregal Romero (2023), in Rooney's fiction, silence signifies a refusal to conform, and at the same time, it portrays "her characters' self-regulation, their incapacity to deal with emotional damage, their use of irony to mask frustration, as well as their personal pressures to hide vulnerability" (215).

Moving back to the idea of *schizophrenia*, Jameson (1983) underscores precisely the aspect where the signifier becomes more material and vivid in sensory ways, whether the new experience is attractive or terrifying. This leads to literalizing

attention towards the words left behind: “the transformation of reality into images, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents” (125). Also, according to Jameson, the concept of *schizophrenia* allows for a more accurate description of time.

Mr Salary, as aforementioned, is narrated in the first person by Sukie in the past tense, but the present tense in which the dialogues are delivered makes the reader feel trapped, along with her in the eternal present of her indecision. She is grappling with her own feelings in relation to her father’s terminal illness and his indifference towards her. Parallel to this, there is her (silent) expectation that Nathan might want to be in a relationship with her. Nevertheless, a break from this present of eternal deferral occurs in two different instances of the story. The first takes place in the hospital, when Sukie realizes that not even in Frank’s deathbed, he will remain indifferent towards her:

It was clear that Frank didn’t know who I was. Realising this, I relaxed somewhat and wiped at my eyes over the edge of the paper mask.

I was crying a little. We may as well have been two strangers talking about whether it would snow or not.

Maybe I’ll marry him, I said.

At this Frank laughed, a performance without any apparent context, but which gratified me anyway. I loved to be rewarded with laughter.

Not a hope. He’ll find some young one.

Younger than me?

Well, you’re getting on, aren’t you?

Then I laughed. Frank gave his IV line an avuncular smile.

But you’re a decent girl, he said. Whatever they might say.

With this enigmatic truce our conversation ended. I tried to talk to him further, but he appeared too tired to engage, or too bored. (Rooney, 2019: 17)

At first, Frank pretended not to recognize her. Eventually, he touches her soft spot, namely, that she is wasting her time waiting for a man who will soon leave her for a younger woman. She exits the hospital feeling miserable and decides to walk home in the rain.

However, as she is walking back, a crowd gathers around the Liffey River, witnessing a boat seemingly lifting something that looked like a body: “The boat approached with its orange siren light revolving silently. I didn’t know whether to leave. I thought I probably didn’t want to see a dead human body lifted out of the Liffey by a rescue boat. But I stayed put” (Rooney, 2019: 18). Yet, a piece of cloth and not a person was fished from its waters, and everyone went on with their lives. The imminence of witnessing death by drowning, likely caused by suicide, gathers strangers and provokes the feeling of commiseration or simply curiosity. This incident, which followed Sukie’s visit to her father, leads to a moment of epiphany that makes her reflect about the ubiquity of death and the inexorable passing of time: “The rescue boat moved away and I stood with my elbows on the bridge, my blood-formation system working as usual, my cells maturing and dying at a normal rate. Nothing inside my body was trying to kill me. Death was, of course, the most ordinary thing that could happen, at some level I knew that” (Rooney, 2019: 19). Sukie realizes that her cells were fine, she was well and alive, and time was passing at a normal rate. She is finally capable of breaking from the eternal present of indecision and glimpse into the future. Once she arrives at Nathan’s home, they watch television together, and a sex scene is shown. Sukie manages to ask him to have sex with her, yet Nathan is still caught in his own present and replies:

No. Paying for your flight home was a small favour. We’re not going to argue about this. It’s not a good idea.

In bed that night I asked him: When will we know if this was a bad idea or not? Should we already know? Because now it feels good.

No, now is too early, he said. I think when you get back to Boston we’ll have more perspective.

I’m not going back to Boston, I didn’t say. These cells may look fairly normal, but they are not. (Rooney, 2019: 21)

The reader infers that even though Nathan had initially refused to go to bed with her, they eventually did have sex. While to Sukie, it felt good, Nathan thought it was too early to be sure. Nonetheless, different from Nathan, Sukie now knows what she will not do: “I’m not going back to Boston, I didn’t say. *These cells may look fairly normal, but they are not*” (Rooney, 2019: 17). Even though she remains silent about her decision

to stay, she is able to break free from the apathy that abated her probably since her mother died, and she had to move from place to place out of lack of choice. Different from her father's cells, which are malformed because of his leukemia, her cells would have been “fairly normal,” but the fact that they were not means that she might not conform to being in a family whose members share the same “blood,” but to embrace a family of choice, even if it is by means of a relationship that does not suit everyone. But this time it is she, and no longer Nathan, who will be dealing the cards.

Final Thoughts

This study has aimed at analyzing Sally Rooney's short story *Mr Salary* (2019) under two main analytical keys. The first is her depiction of transactional relationships, which are established with the purpose of one character profiting over another, such as the case with Sukie and her abusive father and with Sukie and Nathan, who gives her all that money can buy, but chooses not to be with her in a steady relationship. The second analytical key is Frederic Jameson's (1982) conception of schizophrenia, not in a clinical sense, but in how it affects language and interferes with one's notion of the passing of time in the face of global capitalism. This results in the subject's lack of a fully formed identity and a tendency to remain in an eternal present, which can be noticed in Sukie's eternal waiting for Nathan to commit to her. The intricacies of Sukie and Nathan's relationship, as one that is not easily signified, reinforces the importance of what Carregal Romero (2023) has defined as interdependency, which goes against the neoliberal idea of individualism. In contrast to this framework, Rooney presents a relationship-oriented view of the self (Carregal Romero, 2023) in which Sukie's vulnerability is accepted as her quandaries are reevaluated and her suffering is lessened.

Finally, this study has examined how silence is a way of maintaining relationships transactional (Barros del Río, 2022; Carregal Romero, 2023). After visiting her father at the hospital and witnessing the coat being fished from the Liffey in lieu of a dead body, Sukie realizes that death is ubiquitous, and that time was passing. She then communicates her desire to be with Nathan and decides to stay in Ireland despite the fact that he continues to affirm that it is too early for them to be together. Yet, she remains silent about her decision. To conclude, although *Mr Salary* is

not among Rooney's most investigated writings, it certainly deserves consideration as it encapsulates her style and main motifs. A strong sense of alienation, class, and privilege coexist with various forms of physical violence, tense family relationships, job insecurity, high rents, instant messaging, and casual sex are themes that will be later perfected into her greater works.

Works Cited

- BARROS DEL RÍO, María Amor. (2022). "Sally Rooney's *Normal People*: the millennial novel of formation in recessionary Ireland". *Irish Studies Review*, 30(2), 176-192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2022.2080036>
- BOLFARINE, Mariana. (2023). "O corpo em sofrimento e a Irlanda dos millennials em 'At the Clinic', de Sally Rooney". *Letras de hoje*, 58(1). <https://dx.doi.org/10.15448/1984-7726.2023.1.44141>
- CAIN, Sian. (2019, Jan. 9). *How Mayo writer Sally Rooney became a literary phenomenon in the UK*. (online). Irish Times.
- CARREGAL ROMERO, José. (2023). "Unspeakable Injuries and Neoliberal Subjectivities in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*". In M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera and José Carregal-Romero (Eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak* (pp. 213-233). Palgrave MacMillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2>
- CONRAD, Kathryn A. (2004). *Locked in the Family Cell: Gender, Sexuality & Political Agency in Irish National Discourse*. The University of Wisconsin Press.
- FERRITER, Diarmaid. (2004). *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000*. Profile Books.
- GRAY, Jane; GERAGHTY, Ruth; RALPH, David. (2016). *Family Rythms: The Changing Textures of Family Life in Ireland*. Manchester University Press.
- JAMESON, Fredric. (1983). "Postmodernism and consumer society". In Hal Foster (Ed.), *The anti-aesthetic: Essays on postmodern culture* (pp. 111-125). Bay Press.
- LONDON REVIEW BOOKSHOP. (2019, May 8). *Sally Rooney on Normal People, with Kishani Widyaratna* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jH_0rg46Es&t=994s
- ROONEY, Sally. (2019). *Mr Salary*. Faber & Faber. [Kindle]

- SUCHODOLSKI, Veronica. (2019, October 4). “Why Calling Sally Rooney a ‘Millennial Novelist’ Does Her a Diservice”. *Observer*. <https://observer.com/2019/04/sally-rooney-is-more-than-a-millennial-writer-normal-people-shows/>
- SUDJIC, Olivia. (2019, August 17). “Darkly Funny, desperate and Full of Rage: What makes a Millennial Novel?”. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/17/what-makes-a-millennial-novel-olivia-sudjic>
- WOODS, Angela. (2011). “Postmodern schizophrenia”. In *The Sublime Object of Psychiatry: Schizophrenia in Clinical and Cultural Theory* (pp. 183-202). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/med/9780199583959.003.0007>