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The Importance of Being Normal: The Circulation of Affects in Sally Rooney's Short Fiction

La importancia de llamarse "normal": la circulación de afectos en la cuentística de Sally Rooney

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Abstract

When defining the short story, Ireland's alleged eminent prose form, Frank O'Connor surmised that its fictional worlds orbited toward the incapacity to accept a "normal society." In other words, he deemed it a vehicle for abnormal characters. To continue the dialogue fostered by this canonical study, I propose that what lies underneath O'Connor's observations is not a clear-cut differentiation between the two sides of the spectrum, but rather a quest for normalcy, which I pose as a quest for belonging. The first decade of the new millennium witnessed the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, whose neoliberal promise became the dominant public discourse. Its crash left citizens, mainly those belonging to the lower-middle and middle class, unguarded against the predatory capitalism that governs today's world. Contemporary authors are registering the impact of larger, systemic failures in their fictions and confronting their mechanisms. An exemplary case is Sally Rooney, whose brutally precise prose details how the magnitude of ephemeral circumstances feels too overwhelming to understand and, thus, to articulate. Her characters struggle with the intimate

Resumen

Al definir el cuento, el género prosístico asumido como el "más sobresaliente" en Irlanda, Frank O'Connor concluyó que sus mundos ficticios reflejaban la incapacidad de aceptar una "sociedad normal"; es decir, lo estableció como un vehículo para representar personajes anormales. Para dar continuidad al diálogo propiciado por este estudio canónico, propongo que, más allá de la dicotomía desde la cual se interpretan las observaciones de O'Connor, subyace una búsqueda de normalidad, misma que yo planteo como una búsqueda de pertenencia. La primera década del nuevo milenio fue testigo del colapso del Tigre Celta, cuya promesa neoliberal se convirtió en el discurso público dominante. Su caída hizo a los ciudadanos de ingresos bajos y medios presa del capitalismo depredador que acecha el mundo actual, un hecho que autores contemporáneos registran. En estas ficciones, se enfatiza el impacto de dichos fracasos sistémicos y se confrontan sus mecanismos. Un caso ejemplar es Sally Rooney, cuya prosa, brutalmente precisa, detalla cómo la magnitud de las circunstancias efímeras resulta demasiado abrumadora para comprender y, por ende, para articular. Sus personajes libran una batalla con las implicaciones íntimas del mundo global que habitamos

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implications of the global world we inhabit and navigate a profound sense of isolation as a result. Drawing on affect theory, in this article I analyze the characters' processes of becoming aware of their affects and the fact that they are not yet ready to be translated into speech, what I term quotidian unease, in order to illuminate their quest for normalcy in *Mr Salary* and "At the Clinic."

Keywords: *Rooney, Sally||Belonging (Social psychology)||Irish literature||Doctrine of the affections||Social isolation in literature*

y, en consecuencia, navegan un profundo sentido de aislamiento. Con base en la teoría de los afectos, en este artículo analizo los procesos mediante los cuales los personajes de *Mr Salary* y "At the Clinic" se percatan de sus afectos y del hecho de que aún no están listos para ser puestos en palabras, lo cual denomino inquietud cotidiana. Lo anterior tiene la intención de verter luz sobre su búsqueda de normalidad.

Palabras clave: *Rooney, Sally||Pertenencia (Psicología social)||Literatura irlandesa||Doctrina de los afectos||Aislamiento social en literatura*

An Abnormal Genre

The short story has been labeled the most eminent prose form of literature in Ireland (Ingman, 2009: 1; Kenneally, 2019: 16), an epithet nurtured during the second half of the twentieth century due to the impulse to define it as the national genre (D'hoker, 2015: 3). Anne Enright (2011: xi) and Elke D'hoker (2015: 5), among many others, acknowledge Frank O'Connor's (2004) famous study *The Lonely Voice* as a paragon for unraveling its significance, for it is founded upon a long tale of oppositions in Irish history. Being a writer himself, O'Connor (2004) theorized that his was a "submerged population" (10) embodied in "outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society" (11). According to him, the "intense awareness of human loneliness" (11) made Irish authors satisfy "the standards of the individual, solitary, critical reader" (8). To advance his argument, he contrasts the short story to the novel, whose emergence he deemed "impossible without the concept of a normal society" (10). In the former, characters are positioned as normal or abnormal depending on their stance towards the basic assumptions that sustain the text's world-building and point of view. The latter is, in contrast, a genre of alienation: one that gives life to abnormal, fictional people. Yet, underlying this differentiation, there is a "perpetual fantasy to wield against insularity and underdevelopment" (48), as Sarah L. Townsend (2011) calls it, that has "been reclaimed by the Irish as virtues" (49).

Following this narrative of exceptionalism, it comes as no surprise that, to this day, the short story is commonly understood in those terms. In the extratextual realm, the Celtic Tiger is another case in point of this treacherous, enticing façade of singularity: when this unprecedented economic boom began in 1994, it seemed as if Ireland had finally caught up with its continental counterparts after centuries of being "the sick man of Europe" (Morse, 2010: 244). Ideologically, however, it imposed a hegemonic paradigm of neoliberal success and enforced it as the new "normal." Its demise brought forward "bigger, more systemic failures" (Townsend, 2011: 61) that still operate in the Irish contemporary arena, as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher, 2009: 1) has overtaken the stage.

Enright (2011) notices that what O'Connor saw in the short story "rang true at the time" (xii), and I believe this is still true in the twenty-first century for two main reasons. The first is that the exploration of capitalism's devastating consequences is especially keen at the hands of female authors because, like Heather Ingman (2009) points out, his "association of the short story with voices excluded from the ruling narrative of the nation seems peculiarly appropriate for Irish women, an often submerged population group within the public life of the nation" (10). The Celtic Tiger "cultivated gendered constructions of heteronormativity" and, therefore, "women became increasingly disempowered by and subsumed" (Bracken and Harney-Mahajan, 2017: 1) under its rule; as a response, in the period after its downfall these writers have battled against its rampant demands and its subsequent sense of isolation. This leads me to the second reason, which is that, as I see it, underpinning O'Connor's differentiation between normality and abnormality, whose defining feature is loneliness, there is a quest for belonging, which can also be seen as a quest to attain a certain standard of normalcy. People wish to achieve this goal, but to do so they face what Sofía Alférez Mendia (2022) contends: that human beings' ways of relating to one another "are extremely regulated—or even, to some extent, provoked—by social norms" (48) and, unknowingly, internalized.

Given that the short story is an "in-between place of shifting identities, of change and transformation" (Ingman, 2009: 12), during its ongoing "renaissance" (Kenneally, 2019: 18) this genre is an appropriate vehicle for the exploration of what lies outside the margins of what is considered "containable" (Smallwood, 2019). Just as D'hoker (2015) calls for a "relational dimension of Irish short fiction" (7), I too call for an affective reading of

this quest toward normalcy, which implies a negotiation of the intensities exchanged in human relationships, rather than a monolithic stance toward "submerged" or dominant groups, within the "complex material dynamics of globalization" (Townsend, 2011: 51) in this century and its driving ideology, capitalism.

The writings of Sally Rooney (Castlebar, County Mayo, 1991) are a remarkable contribution to this project because, in depicting the everyday lives of people who are deemed outsiders and estranged, her "movement toward intimacy" (Enright, 2021) highlights the power of "vulnerability as a form of courage" (Collins, 2018). To do so, she "leans into the corporeality of her imagination" and registers "capitalism's effects on the body" (Freeman, 2021) through the exchange of intensities I mentioned earlier. For instance, in "Robbie Brady's astonishing late goal takes its place in our personal histories," Helen, one of the two main characters, reflects on the relevance of live streamed events "being recycled as culture in real time": "You know, you're watching the process of cultural production while it takes place, rather than in retrospect. I don't know if that's unique" (Rooney, 2021), she says. I bring this example into the discussion because Rooney's prose feels like that—as if the readers were experiencing the magnitude of an ephemeral circumstance that, often, feels too overwhelming to understand and, thus, to articulate. As her characters struggle with the personal implications of the global world we inhabit, they navigate a profound sense of isolation due to the reigning neoliberal economic model's foundation on indifference (O'Hanlon SJ, 2019: 131). Thus, drawing on affect theory, in this article I analyze the characters' processes of becoming aware of their affects and the fact that they are not yet ready to be translated into speech—what I term quotidian unease—in order to illuminate their quest for normalcy in *Mr Salary* and "At the Clinic."

A Quest for Normalcy

Normalcy is an ideal: one cannot consistently inhabit either side of the spectrum because the standard depends on the varied "forces of encounter" (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 2) one exerts upon their material realities. It is true that "normativity is interwoven in normalcy" (Alférez Mendia, 2022: 42) and, therefore, the former imposes a logic that allows human relationships to be labelled (44), but beneath the surface

of the willingness to access the latter lie "ever new and enlarged potentials of belonging" (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 21). This potential is what Affect Theory studies, as it "fosters a critical attitude toward some unquestioned presuppositions of empirical science and its associated institutional structures that can lead to systematic biases" (Hogan, 2016: 6)—notably, the epistemic privilege of reason over emotion. A major current within this framework draws, often implicitly, from a psychoanalytical tradition; we are meant to understand it "in relation to a prior conception of fundamental drives." Thus, affect, which is a "non-conscious experience of intensity [,] […] a moment of unformed and structured potential," and "a measure of the body's readiness to act in any given circumstance" (Shouse, 2005), is a useful tool for exploring the subjectivities of Rooney's characters because of the visceral emphasis on their construction. By placing the importance of their interactions in their bodies, Rooney challenges "the ethos of materialist consumerism" (Bracken and Harney-Mahajan, 2017: 1) that the Celtic Tiger accentuated and offers one of "mutual care" (Crain, 2021) as an alternative.

Rooney's characters attest how "little chance for a better future" (Williams, 2022: 15) they hold. Her approach to this in her fictional worlds is threefold, and these layers converge in how they signal personal attempts to belong to one's larger context. Firstly, her characters go through the paradoxes of being alive today as they inhabit both physical and digital realms. Whereas the technological advancements in telecommunications allow for a sense of immediate connection, it also provokes an information overload that might lead to catastrophizing despair. More importantly, the rule of the free market forces these characters into a permeating exchange logic which they try to escape but cannot: as they "navigate their relationships in a time of historical crisis" (Freeman, 2021), they look for different possibilities of agency. Secondly, Rooney "captured the zeitgeist" of being a millennial in her representations because she showcases the "emotional and financial precarity of being [one]" (Donnelly, 2019), which translates into having less professional and personal opportunities. They, just like Rooney, constitute the largest and most educated generation in the workforce (Temple, 2019), but are, simultaneously, consumed by an unmatched productivity standard, with little monetary remuneration, that leaves almost no time for personal growth. Lastly, her diegeses are post-recessionary: after the crash of the Celtic Tiger in 2008, which caused "the country's fall from the richest per capita state in Europe to one struggling with rapidly increasing unemployment, decreasing net worth, a failed banking system,

and a short-sighted government" (Morse, 2010: 243), citizens were left with the devastating consequences of financial greed and its glaring disparity, which then forced lower-middle and middle classes into an even more strenuous fight for survival.

In an interview with Michael Nolan (2019), Rooney identifies how the free-market ideology, which once seemed liberating, unveiled its cruelest side after the Tiger's collapse: it first offered a solution to problematics born from heteronormative systemic practices (embodied in Catholicism), but then revealed a similar power imbalance for the "submerged" populations in Ireland, such as millennials. She claims that their defining feature is "that they are in an economically precarious position that older generations have forcibly placed them into," which is to say that they inhabit the "uselessness of modern structures" (Taylor, 2021) as they transit "the collapse of our unbearable world circumstances"—and they do so all while attempting to "formalize the felt burdens of capitalist exhaustion as an internal struggle" (Hu, 2020). Prompted by Alexandra Schwartz's (2017) observation that "Capitalism is to Rooney's young women what Catholicism was to Joyce's young men, a rotten social faith to contend with," Rooney argues that this economic system does not console people "through periods of immense suffering" (Nolan, 2017). What was lost in this transition, she says, is a sense of community. Moreover, she goes on to explain that "the Catholic Church was replaced pretty much wholesale with the power of the free market, and free-market ideology has replaced Catholic ideology," which also illuminates why her characters are in desperate need of a faith that seems viable only within human connection.

While conversing with Alex Clark (2018), Rooney describes herself as "quite boring and normal" as a person—but, as an author, she has received an unmatched attention. This self-characterization might leak into her fictions, for the realism through which she concocts them has hit a "resonant chord" (Clark, 2018) in contemporary audiences, mostly appealing to those in her age range (but not exclusive to it).[1] Since her first publication in 2016,[2] like Christine Smallwood (2019) observes, she has pursued specific thematic concerns through an incisive exploration of her young characters' psyches. Her subject matter is love, explored through

1 Nonetheless, she has encountered backlash for her alleged lack of political action and her characters being white, privileged, and self-centered (White, 2017; Tu, 2021; Hu, 2020).

2 Before publishing her first short story, Rooney's essay titled "Even if you beat me" appeared in 2015. Said piece already sheds a light in her authorial concerns, but, for the purposes of this paper, I focus on her fiction writings.

the intimacy for which her young characters yearn while immersed in a perpetual power struggle, mostly economical, not only amongst each other, but against the precarious circumstances that result from what Rooney herself calls "predatory capitalism" (Nolan, 2017). In a span of eight years, her protagonists and plots have gained distinguishing features that make them recognizable as hers. Going from the general to the particular, they are millennials, born and raised in Ireland between 1981 and 1996, who feel intensely, and are not yet well-versed in how to sustain a connection with others (not that anyone ever steadily is). They are "ambivalent, sensitive, lethal in conversation" (Taylor, 2021) as well as "confident and self-hating" (Williams, 2022); they "are let down by the adult world, but intrigued, too, and maybe galvanized." Readers feel attracted to them thanks to the minute attention Rooney grants to their "emotional landscapes" (Clark, 2018) and her "freakish psychological acuity" (Smallwood, 2019): she fully forms their "quirks" (Raw, 2023) so that they confer an aura of verisimilitude that, in turn, produces visceral reactions in the audiences as they accompany them through their processes toward intimacy and the acceptance of their connections as immanent.

Among the many praises her works have garnered, I cannot help but notice that some of the adjectives used to describe her prose are metaphoric: burning (Enright, 2021), spell-binding (Madole, 2024), annihilating, liquid (Raw, 2023), laser-sharp (Donnelly, 2019), artery-nicking (Garner, 2019), heart-stopping (Smallwood, 2019). These figurative descriptions underscore a sensation of brutal exactness that triggers a pungent reaction that is hard to pinpoint. Rooney's plots are "scattered salient moments" (Corsetti, 2022) among characters talking to each other incessantly; their conversations tend toward the philosophical, but do not come to a resolution. "Rooney's most devastating lines are often her most affectless," says Collins (2018): the interiority she explores through her characters might seem contradictory to the naked quality of her writing—the first is too overwhelming, while the other seems too mundane. Yet, I contend that this potential contradiction—the sustained quotidian unease that her characters go through—is what gives her narrative that difficult-to-describe power, as it accentuates the comings and goings of attempting to fit in in what is considered normal. "[S] tripped off of their armours," these young characters transit "human vulnerability in an overwhelming, imperfect world" (Corsetti, 2022), and their "troubled connection

to human intimacy" (Madole, 2024) and the relationships through which it surfaces resonates with affect, as it "arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon" (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 1).

Melissa Gregg's and Gregory Seigworth's (2010) definition of affect is similar to Shouse's insofar as its experience is pre-personal:

> Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. (1)

This lens fits Rooney's characters' interactions as they stem from a desire of being able to both affect and be affected, from the varied "intensities of experience" (Enright, 2021) they exert upon each other as they navigate their personal parcels of a globalized world in their journeys toward belonging. Since their relationships are in constant negotiation, these characters' affects "*accumulate* across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness" (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 2). What unites them, however, is the aforementioned quest for normalcy: they come together in their attempt to articulate "a reality for which we haven't yet developed rules and forms" (Madole, 2024).

Rob Madole's (2024) diagnosis is that Rooney's characters' "reactions are presented to us as something like poker tells, as unwanted revelations of the trembling heart beneath the tough-skinned facade." To say it with Seigworth and Gregg (2010), their bodies react "within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities: all the minuscule or the molecular events of the unnoticed" (2). As discussed above, the background of their daily lives is the "general systems collapse" (Freeman, 2021), so their contextual normalcy, unglamorous as it is, is plagued by unformed sensations brought to the forefront once their desires become transparent in their interactions. In the author's tendency toward "hyper-awareness or hyper-intimacy" (Nolan, 2019) and her quest to exert a sense of belonging, it is possible to take in the burdens of the twenty-first century and find solace.

Considering the whole of Rooney's published works into account, Ellen Raw (2023) humorously surmises that her plots present a "problematic power dynamic, age gap, 'daddy issues', dead parent, university, alcoholism, English literature degree or email correspondence." Although these patterns have become more apparent as her career develops, they are already visible in her early fiction. Nominated in 2017 for the Sunday Times EFG Award, *Mr Salary* first appeared in April 2016 on *Granta*; three years later, it was printed as part of the Faber Stories collection. The plot is straightforward: during Christmastime, Sukie Doherty, the autodiegetic narrative voice, travels to Dublin, from Boston, to see her father, Frank, who has leukemia. Throughout its four segments, however, it becomes apparent that the dynamics underlying that trip are anything but simple. Although Frank is the pretext for Sukie's coming back to Dublin, the intensities that build up are garnered through her interactions with Nathan, a man sixteen years her senior and a semi-distant family connection. He is also the man with whom she lived for three years and for whom she feels love and attraction—and her only close connection. Besides a distant kinship and the Midlands in common, their relationship is extraordinary. From the start, besides the age difference, there is also an economic power imbalance, as well as a contrasting upbringing. Nathan's relationship with his family does not raise concerns, while Sukie's is limited to his opioid-addicted, money-asking father because her mother died shortly after her birth. More importantly, the latter transits a "girlfriend-to-daughter spectrum" (Rooney, 2019: 8) in relation to the former—which lies somewhere between normality and abnormality, as it overflows the available labels in the eyes of their peers.

The story starts in transition: the forces of encounter between the two main characters are reflected by the first location where they meet, the airport. Signs of the Celtic Tiger are scattered in the novelty of the most recent Dublin airport and in Nathan's job: "At some point the company [where he worked] had been bought out by Google, and now they all made hilarious salaries" (Rooney, 2019: 6). In this relationship, Nathan does not hesitate to spend money on Sukie—but the exchange is not transactional. Among the most notorious aspects of their characterizations, the clear-cut ethos of mutual care stands out. Sukie thinks she understands it, but she does not know how to explain it (Rooney, 2019: 6). Everyone except them seems suspicious of their agreement. Although they have a corresponding sexual attraction, Nathan is categorical about not acting on it because it is a "bad idea" (Rooney, 2019: 17). This

mutual desire, however, exemplifies affect's "supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility" and "its capacity for extending further still" (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 2) because, as the short story progresses, they add a new layer of vulnerability in their intimacy.

What audiences witness is the ordinariness within an exceptional and significant moment. The impact of the protagonists' dynamic is put forward as Sukie reflects "We were predictable to each other, like two halves of the same brain" (Rooney, 2019: 9) when thinking of her and Nathan. Additionally, looming over her head is her ex-boyfriend's accusation of her emotional frigidity (8). Regardless of having been a whole continent apart, once they get to his apartment their routine settles again, which is shown in how matter-of-factly she asks him if he would grieve if she were dead in the middle of dinner. In other words, amidst the comfort Sukie finds in their exchanges, there is also the imminent awareness of her own mortality, prompted by her father's illness—an unease that does not go away. Because she is the narrator, her "poker tells" show in her free association of ideas, her extensive use of similes, and her bodily reactions. While everything with Nathan tends toward care and reciprocity, with Frank she loses control. So, to regain it, she "absorb[s] large volumes of information […], like [she] could master the distress through intellectual dominance" (Rooney, 2019: 8), and that is how she comes to the realization that, when someone has leukemia, their "cells may look fairly normal, but they are not" (11).

Said quotation serves as the axis from which Sukie moves through and around this time in her life. She does not care much for Frank, yet, once she faces him at the hospital, she "heard [her] own voice grow wavery like a bad choral performance" (Rooney, 2019: 13). Even the routinary, neglectful interactions with her father lose sense, and she ignores how to articulate her reaction—although they pour out of her body. A similar force of non-belonging transpires on her way back to Nathan's flat: along with a group of people by the river, she thinks she is about to face "a dead human body lifted out of the Liffey by a rescue boat" (15). At first, she finds consolation in knowing that all those gathered around seem to be there for compassion rather than morbidity. Nonetheless, as the dead body turns out to be a piece of clothing, she notices how their reactions change: "Everything was normal that quickly" (15). As soon as she comes to that conclusion, she relates this experience to her own existence

at that very moment, for her "cells [were] maturing and dying at a normal rate" (15), unlike her father's or the presumed corpse. As she makes her way through Nathan's door, audiences witness how everything has changed once more: crossing this threshold is charged with new unformed awarenesses.

Nathan, who had offered to wait for her at the hospital or pick her up if it rained, does not react to her soaked appearance or her defeat. In contrast, he welcomes her next to him in the couch, where he begins touching her hair absentmindedly. Sukie says: "I found his distraction comforting. In a way, I wanted to live inside it, as if it was a place of its own, where he would never notice I had entered" (Rooney, 2019: 17). In this sentence, disguised by an apparent simplicity that nevertheless introduces a complex set of unarticulated emotions, she shows a need for intimacy that feels redemptive. Through his seemingly oblivious caress, Nathan is consoling her through a period of acute suffering. This is further enhanced when, encouraged by a deep desire to feel grounded, Sukie turns their ordinary exchanges into a "highly sexed and fervent intimacy" (Raw, 2023). As she asks Nathan if they can "fuck" (Rooney, 2019: 17), the pregnant silence that ensues evolves into an ellipsis of bodily gratification of which readers only learn as the protagonists are lying in bed afterwards. Donnelly (2019) stipulates that, in this context, sex "provides respite from a surveilling society, even as it exposes to you to a single other soul," which readers can appreciate as Sukie, as if in an epiphany, concludes she is not going back to Boston. However, that final portion of the text does not come on its own. What once was a medical statement on leukemia transforms into a refrain that is simultaneously consolatory and devastating: "These cells may look fairly normal, but they are not" (Rooney, 2019: 18). Whatever was normal at the beginning of the short story morphed by its end, and the abnormality of her circumstances that night becomes a consolatory sense of belonging in her partner's arms.

Mr Salary is a powerful example of the "yet-ness" of affect as Seigworth and Gregg (2010) view it: it registers a body's "doings and undoings" (3) against "the world's apparent intractability" (1). "At the Clinic," which was published only a few months after and is the piece where the characters Marianne and Connell from *Normal People* came into being, also depicts these forces of encounter. There is no age-gap between the protagonists, but the economic power imbalance and the pursuit of human connection remain. In addition, the two twenty-three-year-old protagonists are away from home, studying in Dublin. In this plot, which transpires close to

Christmas, the main action is a visit to a dental clinic: Connell drives his friend (and sexual partner) Marianne for an extraction. The introduction to these characters also occurs while they are in transit, driving. Although their relationship seems like a transactional exchange, this initial suggestion swiftly moves into a visceral experience after a brief recognition of fragility: "Connell is driving her to the clinic because he's her only friend with a car, and also the only person in whom she confides about distasteful medical conditions like impacted teeth" (Rooney, 2020).

The focalization of the heterodiegetic narrative voice alternates between Marianne and Connell, and most of their internal struggles remain in the realm of the unsaid. Different to *Mr Salary*, this story emphasizes different degrees of unacknowledged physical pain. From Connell's view, Marianne's jaw ache begun after she "gave him head," while the former remembers her mouth was already sore as she was performing oral sex (Rooney, 2020). The common thread in this experience is Connell's slight cruelty, as he accuses her of complaining "a lot more than other people" (Rooney, 2020). In this example, according to the male character's standard of an acceptable amount of fretting, the female one lies outside its limit. However, the gratuitous harshness is later contextualized as an inability to let vulnerability surface. After the complaint allegation, Marianne accuses Connell of being "incapable of expressing sympathy" and not seeing "women as fully human;" simultaneously, he had been contemplating his own "failure to feel anything" (Rooney, 2020). These dialogues reveal the muddiness that builds affects up, for they come before the formation of any rational pattern. The characters experience their bodies' process of tightening and releasing the tensions of their reactions as they voice arguments that are not yet formed. In the diegesis, when Marianne gets home, her emotional and physical pain merge into a potentialized intensity: "She took a bottle of gin from inside of the fridge door and poured a little into her mouth experimentally. Rinsing the cold alcohol around her gums, a gigantic pain shot up the inside of her jaw and made her eyes water. She drooled the gin back out into her kitchen sink and started crying" (Rooney, 2020).

This is the backdrop to their drive to the clinic, where nothing of epic proportions occurs. Marianne, who "takes significant personal pleasure in having her pain validated by professionals" (Rooney, 2020), had been in agony for the previous week, but she had not found the words to explain it until the dentist's diagnosis: "That tooth is slicing through your cheek like butter" (Rooney, 2020). While in the waiting room, neither character talks much. Nonetheless, what readers witness are flashbacks of previous encounters, all

mediated by their insecurities, their subsequent overthinking, and minuscule actions propelled by the enjoyment found in affecting one another—either friendly or hostilely. After Connell ironically confides to Marianne that he "must tune [her] out sometimes," the narrative voice highlights her unpremeditated reaction: "She gazes back into the magazine, looking amused" (Rooney, 2020). This is what Connell calls "brief flashes," moments in which Marianne becomes transparent to him, just before her enigmatic, defensive personality masks her again. Yet, he too is transparent to her: he coughs as he becomes distressed by guilt and swallows when faced with Marianne's disposition to play the cruelty game.

When pondering upon their situation, Connell speaks of "malice." These characters are not romantically involved, at least not in a normative fashion, but they rely on one another as they go through adulthood. Both had official partners with whom each had recently broken up. Within their separations, they realize how little they had cared for them and, more importantly, how much they cared for one another. Marianne "doesn't express fears or physical suffering," and Connell has trouble dealing with her pain (Rooney, 2020). The visit to the clinic was supposed to be routinary: it was a simple extraction of an unruly (and ironically named) wisdom tooth. When the nurse calls for Marianne to get into the surgery, Connell bites his fingernail to a pulp as he further reflects on her companion's proclivity to self-laceration. Once she is alone, facing what is supposed to be an uncomplicated solution to a common problem, she is overcome by the literal brutality exerted upon her:

> Inside the surgery they have given Marianne an anaesthetic. The dentist sticks a sharp instrument into Marianne's gum to see if she can feel it, and she can't. Then he sets about removing the tooth. At first she can hear grinding. A glowing white lamp reflects into her eyes from the mirror above her, and the latex of the dentist's gloves tastes sadomasochistic. Something is whirring, and a strange thin liquid is filling Marianne's mouth. It does not taste like blood.(Rooney, 2020)

She does not recognize her body's reactions as she is told to spit out the "small yellow part of her" that has been ripped out. It does not make sense: "The tooth glistens like a cream in the dentist's palm. […] [It] has fronds like an anemone" (Rooney, 2020). The most definite sign of her absolute and unexpected vulnerability comes as a surprise to her, but not to the readers, as the narrative voice plainly states "Marianne is trembling."

When she inhabits the seismic intensities of this experience, more visceral impulses betray her: she "feels a tidal gratitude which drenches her in sweat" for Connell's presence, "and her eyes begin to prick with tears," just as it had happened after their last sexual encounter and the stagnant gulp of gin (Rooney, 2020). Connell reacts to seeing her in this state; he knows he "experiences certain feelings," although he cannot name them (Rooney, 2020). While taking in her present reality as if she were "in the wrong body," Marianne gets into Connell's the car, "small and lonely" (Rooney, 2020). In the past, she had told him that she thought she "deserve[d] bad things because [she is] a bad person," and he cannot help but shudder at her current distress and the weight her words carry (Rooney, 2020). A "fear of being left defenseless" (Kavanagh, 2024) gains protagonism here, and in this overflow of vulnerability the couple circles back to their relationship status and how their small cruelties had impacted each other. Marianne then asks Connell, with "brash curiosity," operating as an armor, if her words had triggered his break-up (Rooney, 2020). Instead of offering an answer, silence ensues. The heterodiegetic narrative voice focuses first on the male character, who is staring blindly ahead, deep in his thoughts of his friend's literal and metaphorical nakedness, assuming her crying comes from "residual physical pain" (Rooney, 2020). Contrary to what he thinks, audiences know the female character's crying is not only a consequence of the surgery, but also an amalgamation of intensities, to borrow Seigworth's and Gregg's approach to defining affect. Marianne's nonchalance is, too, a performance, for she is well aware that "What she feels is not easily expressed anyway." For this reason, crumpled up and teary as she is, the only conclusion to which she can come to is that "People love all kinds of things: their friends, their parents. Misunderstandings are inevitable," which surmises the tidal, molecular reactions she meets this quotidian unease (Rooney, 2020). As is also typical of Rooney's endings, this short story's is charged with potential: "You're still crying, are you? he says. The feeling is coming back now, she says. That's all" (Rooney, 2020).

The noun *feelings* becomes defused, and, instead of referring to one single instance of whatever she deems as such, the polysemy of the word reflects how her various affects merge into just that: a potential. This single simple sentence does not provide clarity, even when her crying reveals the processes of related and unrelatedness she experiences. Yet, all the affects that had been circulating among these characters and

the routinary procedure they went through culminate in a realization of an intimate vulnerability that renders Marianne, and Connell, both desolate, but also comforted in each other's presences as if they belonged exactly where they are.

The Impossibility of Being Normal

When speaking about the short story as a vehicle for abnormal characters, O'Connor was already suggesting that, within the differentiation between normality and abnormality lies a desire to hold on to a sense of community. It is visible not only through the binary that divides an "us" against "them," a division that makes power struggles much more digestible, but also in how he recognizes that Ireland's struggles might be echoed elsewhere. While D'hoker (2015) correctly notes "the contradictions and idiosyncrasies" (5) of his approach, and how much of his prejudice leaks into his understanding of the genre (and his own practice of it), in *The Lonely Voice* there is also room for what she calls reimagination. For example, in addressing the solitary, critical readers and attempting to satisfy, if only for an instant, their potentially unacknowledged desire to see themselves in this type of fiction, O'Connor was also setting forth a quest for belonging. This might not have been his main aim, but, when studying the works of contemporary short story authors, the tension O'Connor explores seems current to today's expectations of normalcy.

When detailing how this prose form emerges from "something that springs from a single detail and embraces past, present, and future" (O'Connor, 2004: 12), he too is referring to scattered salient moments that are made up from the potential that forms affective exchanges. As I mention in the introduction of this article, via Enright's observation, O'Connor's words made sense when he first wrote them, for they mirrored the narrative of exceptionality that Ireland held as one of its most valuable possessions. Although disguised differently, the Celtic Tiger also took advantage of said mirage and, with it, the State's position aligned with the brutal neoliberal practice that grounds capitalism. In a way, it is possible to say that, as a nation, Ireland's quest for normalcy—for belonging to the transnational, cosmopolitan arena—is what has led contemporary authors, such as Rooney, to contend with the repercussions of this "new normal."

When Rooney begun her writing career, the Post-Celtic Tiger—a recession that came along with a flourishing in the arts—the consequences of Tiger greed had already been exposed, studied, and, more importantly, experienced in the flesh for almost a decade. In her diegeses, characters inhabit a personal, political, and economic state of in-betweenness in regard to normalcy—as most of their extratextual counterparts do. What is at stake when existing outsaid normalcy is alienation; nevertheless, what I gather after having explored the hardships of growing up in a world that seems inherently hostile is that, even when the very concept of "normalcy" is nothing more than an ideal—which can be as oppressing as any imposed paradigm—there is hope in knowing that, while our globalized contexts corner us into an overwhelming sense of not-belonging, it is in our human nature to move through either end of the spectrum as we make sense of the quotidian unease our circumstances, and our relationships, bring forward. In this sense, Affect Theory offers solace in its acceptance that whatever intensities transpire from body to body can be either a form of relatedness or unrelatedness. This is what Rooney does best: pointing out how, in a search of human connection, there will be as much pain as there is pleasure, and the two—as well as whatever lies in between—will only be but an immanent step toward something else.

Rooney's diegeses depict the circulation of affects, understood as pre-personal forces of encounter exchanged through bodies. Analyzing this author's short fiction is relevant not only because criticism has paid less attention to it than to her novels, but also because they perfectly embody the perennial quest for normalcy I delineate above. Dissident and defiant, her characters attempt to make sense of how to individually navigate the larger, systemic failures of capitalism, as it is "what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration" (Fisher, 2009: 5). This is the battle which Rooney, both authorially and personally, fights. While it would be easy to fall prey into a defeatist spiral, she, just like her characters, rebels against this oppression through emphasizing the value of intimacy—which, although not a solution, is certainly a viable alternative. In her secularized Ireland, the closest one comes to purpose is human connection. Donnelly (2019) calls it "something like grace" and "absolution;" others, redemption. I understand it as affect: as possibilities within pure potential.

The power of *Mr Salary* and "At the Clinic" lies on what I have termed quotidian unease, which is the characters' awareness of their affects as they unfold. Ontological comments surface amidst ordinary conversation, signaling the preoccupations proper

to their hazardous contexts. More importantly, their visceral capacities to react reveal their vulnerabilities in a world that has consistently tried to harden them. In *Mr Salary*, Sukie's relationship with Nathan, despite its economic power imbalance, serves as a balm against a harsh reality in which "death [is] more of a miracle than life" (Rooney, 2019: 15). Although it is Frank, Sukie's father, who has leukemia, it is her cells that become "abnormal" by the story's end, as she relishes in the immanent pleasure she feels in her intimacy with Nathan. Similarly, in "At the Clinic," Marianne's physical pain after having a wisdom tooth extracted mirrors a "desire to be cared for" (Rooney, 2020) that leaves her naked in her friend/lover's eyes, and there she finds comfort. In both cases, what comes to the forefront is an ethos of mutual care that, albeit fleeting, allows for a sense of belonging. In the end, the importance of navigating personal and collective identities and their myriad relations does not lie on her characters being normal—but in their impossibility of being fully so and finding relatedness in the way.

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