

Mirrors of the Self: Identity and Recognition in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

¹Arthi Y P

Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science, Avinashi Rd, PSG CAS, Civil Aerodrome Post, Coimbatore- 14, Tamil Nadu, India

²Dr M. Samundeeswari

Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science, Avinashi Rd, PSG CAS, Civil Aerodrome Post, Coimbatore- 14, Tamil Nadu, India

Corresponding Author E-mail: ajithasri12@gmail.com

Abstract

The psychological basis of Sally Rooney's *Normal People* is examined in this paper using E. Tory Higgins's Self-Discrepancy Theory as a critical lens. It contends that Connell Waldren and Marianne Sheridan's tense relationship is primarily driven by their internal conflicts with self-concept going beyond interpretations of the novel as an unambiguous portrayal of millennial love and social anxieties. The study indicates that Connell's prevalent social anxiety and feelings of inadequacy originate from a significant disparity between his Actual Self (sensitive, introspective) and his Ought Self (the performative, socially adept persona desired by his peers). On the contrary, Marianne's self-destructive behaviours are correlated with a severe deficiency in her Ideal Self which is a model of intrinsic worthiness. This gap was caused by familial violence which makes Marianne feel that her Actual Self is unlovable. Even while each serves as a witness to the other's concealed Actual Self, their union is constantly threatened by the internalized pressures of their Ought and failing Ideal selves. Their compelling yet unstable connection is seen to be a cyclical negotiation of these disparities. In the conclusion, this theoretical interpretation presents *Normal People* as a prominent modern story of the quest for self-coherence, reinterpreting the suffering of its protagonists as a precise psychological portrayal of living with unresolved self-discrepancy rather than just melodrama.

Keywords: Self-Discrepancy Theory, Internal conflicts, Millennial love, Social anxiety, Ideal selves.

Introduction

Millennial Anguish Through a Psychological Lens *Normal People* by Sally Rooney has been praised for its realistic depiction of a millennial relationship which is frequently examined from the prisms of communication, power and class. However, a more accurate diagnostic method is necessary due to the deep and unique character of the protagonists' suffering, Marianne's ingrained self-destruction and Connell's crippling anxiety. This paper uses E. Tory Higgins's Self-Discrepancy Theory to make the case that the two main characters' basic misalignment serves as the novel's emotional heart and narrative engine. Connell and Marianne are not only 'damaged' or 'anxious'; rather, they are prototypes of two different psychological differences that influence their actions, mold their perspectives and intensify their tense relationship. By using this theory, we go beyond theme description to a methodical examination of the structural structure of their suffering, making *Normal People* an important study of the divided, contemporary self.

2. Theoretical Basis: The Pain-Inducing Gaps

The Self-Discrepancy Theory of E. Tory Higgins offers a straightforward framework for comprehending the relationship between various self-representations and particular emotional vulnerabilities. Three main cognitive domains are distinguished under the theory:

- **The Real Self:** The qualities a person feels they actually have.
- **The Ideal Self:** The qualities one aims to have (desires, objectives).
- **The Ought Self:** The qualities one feels one should or ought to have (responsibilities, obligations).

Perceived differences across these categories are the source of emotional pain. Dejection-related feelings of disappointment, grief and guilt are brought on by an Actual/Ideal gap or falling short of one's own expectations. Anxiety, remorse and fear are among the agitation-related feelings that result from an Actual/Ought disparity (failing to fulfil external norms). This paradigm is very useful for literary analysis since it allows us to identify the exact structure of a character's internal conflict, explaining both the character's suffering and the cause of it. (Higgins, 1987; Phillips & Silvia, 2010)

3. Connell Waldren: The Prison of the Ought Self

A classic example of a persistent Actual/Ought difference is Connell's voyage. His natural Actual Self is perceptive, thoughtful and sympathetic. He is an innate writer and thinker who feels more at ease reading and having intimate conversations than performing in public. However starting in adolescence, he is controlled by a strong Ought Self, the image of the 'normal,' well-liked, athletic and socially awkward young man that his Carrickhawn surroundings demand.

3.1 Secondary School Performance and Anxiety

This disparity shows up as persistent, low-grade agitation at school. His identity, he believes is "managed by the opinions of others." (Rooney, 2018, p.58) The crucial manifestation of this Ought Self's demands is his choice to conceal his connection with Marianne and bring another female to the Debs. It is an act of social survival rather than malice, motivated by the traditional agitated feeling of dread of being judged. However, the ensuing extreme guilt illustrates the double bind: honoring the Ought Self goes against the ideals of his Actual Self (loyalty, authenticity), which exacerbates his pain.

3.2 Impostor Syndrome and Class at Trinity

University exacerbates rather than resolves his discrepancy. The social Ought Self is replaced by an academic-cultural one - the clever, articulate Trinity student. Connell experiences this through a class lens, feeling like an impostor. His social anxiety crystallizes into panic attacks, a physiological symptom of the agitation. At parties, he is consciously 'performing the list of characteristics he possessed that made him socially acceptable.' His entire social existence is a relentless, exhausting performance to bridge the gap between his Actual Self (the outsider) and his perceived Ought Self (the assimilated peer).

3.3 The Crisis and Tentative Integration

The logical result of this unsustainable division is his depressive breakdown. His performance is destroyed by the strain of gendered expectations (the male "ought" to supply) and economic instability. Importantly, writing and therapy are aspects of his road to recovery that are in line with his Actual Self. While therapy becomes a place to analyze and demolish the punitive Ought Self scripts, writing gives him a chance to express himself authentically. His arc implies that in order to lessen the disparity, internalized, oppressive desires must be silenced in addition to exterior objectives.

4. Marianne Sheridan: The Abyss of a Shattered Ideal Self

Connell's pathology is the opposite of Marianne's. She has a severe, catastrophic Actual/Ideal mismatch. Her true self is fiercely independent, astute, and intellectually strong. However, familial abuse has methodically shattered her Ideal Self - the mental vision of a person deserving of love, protection and care. She learned a fundamental lesson from her mother's neglect and her brother's violence: her Actual Self is 'damaged, unworthy and essentially unlovable.'

4.1 Trauma as the Architect of Self-Concept

Rather than being a mood, this damaged self-image is a core belief. She does not deserve kindness (a positive Ideal) if she is unworthy (her perceived Actual Self), which creates a deadly logical cycle. This makes Connell's delicate affection feel weird and uncomfortable. "You shouldn't love me, I'm not a good guy", she says to him. Rather than being attempts at enjoyment, her relationships are confirmations of this sad self-theory. Her wealth and social status at Trinity create a caustic, sharp facade that highlights the discrepancy between appearance and inner reality. (Tchesnovsky, 2023)

4.2 The Re-enactment of Worthlessness: Jamie and Lukas

Her relationships with Jamie and Lukas are not mistakes but logical enactments of her discrepancy. If her Actual Self is bad, then she ought to be with someone who treats her poorly. With Jamie, she endures psychological humiliation. She explicitly seeks for physical humiliation from Lukas in an effort to align her subjective sense of just punishment with her physical reality. Connell's flat, resigned dejection - a profound guilt and regret that this is her existential lot rather than her frenzied anxiousness is the emotional tone here.

4.3 Isolation and Intelligence as Armor

Marianne's biggest strength and main line of defense is her intelligence. It enables her to project an air of competence and superiority while controlling talks. However, people are repelled by this precise sharpness, which strengthens her perception of her own alienating 'difference.' Only with Connell, who is her intellectual equal and refuses to be repelled by her defenses, does this wall crack, allowing her vulnerable Actual Self moments of terrifying exposure.

5. The Relational System: Witnessing and Sabotage

The power of the novel comes from the way these disparate elements come together to create a dynamic, magnetic relational framework. Connell and Marianne are, for each other, the primary 'significant other' who can both alleviate and intensify their inner conflicts.

5.1 Mutual Recognition of the Actual Self

Their bond is powerful because it is the primary space where their hidden **Actual Selves** are fully seen and accepted. Connell reflects that Marianne "had understood him better than he understood himself." She values the sensitive thinker beneath his performance. Conversely, Marianne tells Connell that with him, things feel "real" (Rooney, 2018, p.161). He provides a 'secure space' where her true self is not exploited. They function as positive 'self-guides' for one another, offering a fleeting glimpse of what an integrated, accepted self might feel like.

5.2 The Cyclical Pattern of Sabotage

But this relationship is continuously undermined by their own differences. The pattern is unrelenting:
1. Connection: Mutual acknowledgment of their true selves gives them comfort.

2. Pressure: Connell's Ought Self (economic worry, fear of being judged) causes him to withdraw or act hurtfully (e.g., departing for the summer without explaining their relationship).

3. Reinforcement: Marianne's wounded Ideal Self interprets his retreat as evidence that she is unlovable, which drives her into destructive relationships with other people.

4. Alienation: Connell is confused and afraid by her self-destructive behavior, which goes against his perception of how she should be handled and leaves him feeling powerless.

5. Return: The cycle is restarted when they are drawn back by the special comfort they find in one another.

They are caught in a feedback loop where each one's coping mechanism for their own discrepancy actively triggers the other's core wound.

5.3 Interdependence as Resolution

A cure or a fairy-tale fusion is rejected at the end of the book. Rather, it advances toward a more developed interdependence. "No one can be independent of other people completely, so why not give up the attempt" is Marianne's last statement, which represents a bold acceptance. It acknowledges that attaining self-coherence might not be an internal state for individuals, but rather a relational action. Connell's departure for New York with her consent serves as a metaphor for this: their partnership is not a cage but rather a solid witness that allows them to gently follow their different paths while bearing the knowledge that the other accepts and acknowledges their true selves. (Sanders, 2019)

6. Form Mirroring Fracture: Rooney's Stylistic Method

Rooney's unique writing style is a formal analogy to the psychological repression of her characters rather than just being aesthetically pleasing. (Zhu & Zhang, 2025)

6.1 Sparse Prose and Emotional Withholding

The extremely 'flat,' plain style, which avoids figurative flair and in-depth interior monologue, reflects Connell and Marianne's inability to convey their inner struggle. Emotions are often expressed through physical description or verbal subtext. Their communication style, which involves silences and missing cues is reflected in their artistic constraint. The portrayal of emotional breakthroughs is remarkably straightforward: "He cried. She held him." (Rooney, 2018, p.223) which gives them an overpowering sense of strength since they breach the controlled surface of the characters' performed selves and the text.

6.2 Using Digital Communication to Manage Discrepancies

One essential formal tool is the use of SMS and emails. Characters can control their inconsistencies by using digital space as a platform for carefully chosen self-presentation. Connell expresses his intellectual Ought Self in his well-written emails. Though it also makes evasion and miscommunication easier, their digital connection permits an honesty that is occasionally suppressed in person. This dual role, which offers a stage for the played self while yearning for and occasionally attaining moments of genuine connection, properly encapsulates the state of the modern world. (Hu et al, 2022)

7. Conclusion: A Portrait of Modern Selfhood

The struggle to create a cohesive identity in the face of competing internal and external demands is a fundamental modern challenge that *Normal People* precisely analyzes via the lens of Self-Discrepancy Theory.

Rooney shows how the agony of youth is structurally particular rather than amorphous, controlled by the differences between who we are who we want to be, and who we feel driven to be.

The novel's refusal of a simple conclusion is what gives it its lasting appeal. Marianne and Connell don't 'fix' one another. They are on a trip to come to terms with the fact that, although the chasm within may never completely shut, it can be traversed by someone who can see its contours. *Normal People* is a poignant, psychologically insightful vision of how we could learn to live with our divided selves by promoting interconnectedness over solo perfection.

References

1. Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94(3), 319–340.
2. Hu, C., Cao, R., Huang, J., & Wei, Y. (2022). The effect of self-discrepancy on online behavior: A literature review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 883736.
3. Phillips, A. G., & Silvia, P. J. (2005). Self-awareness and the emotional consequences of self-discrepancies. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(5), 703–713.
4. Rooney, S. (2018). *Normal people*. Faber & Faber.
5. Sanders, F. (2019, April). Me, myself, and you: Sally Rooney's 'Normal People'. *The Millions*. <https://themillions.com/2019/04/me-myself-and-you-sally-rooneys-normal-people.html>
6. Tchesnovsky, A. (2023). Trauma and “Sapiosex” in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*. In M. M. Knight (Ed.), *Writing the World, Volume 2* (pp. 1–11). UMass Amherst Libraries. <https://doi.org/10.7275/0q9m-nx94>
7. Zhu, S., & Zhang, R. (2025). Different selves in cross-media narratives: An analysis of Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*. *Arts*, 5(2), 7.