

**Charles University in Prague**  
Faculty of Education

Department of English Language and Literature

**DIPLOMA THESIS**

Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* from the Perspective  
of Marxist Literary Criticism

Romány Sally Rooneyové *Rozhovory s přáteli* a *Normální lidé* z pohledu marxistické  
literární kritiky

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that I have written this diploma thesis by myself and that I have not used any sources other than those listed in the Works cited section. I further declare that this thesis was not used to obtain another academic title.

Prague, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021

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Signature

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## Abstract

This diploma thesis examines Sally Rooney's novels *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* from the viewpoint of Marxist literary criticism. Based on the author's own claim to incorporate "a Marxist framework" into her writing as a way of describing the surrounding world, the thesis, therefore, aims to explore the aforementioned novels with regard to Marx's theory. The first part focuses on the theoretical background and principal thoughts of Marxism and Marxist literary criticism. Next, there is outlined the conception of social classes in Ireland and a brief introduction of Sally Rooney's views in order to provide context to the novels. The second part of the thesis then applies the theoretical background to an analysis of the novels themselves. This includes their stories, settings, characters and conveyed ideas in relation to the issues of base and superstructure, power dynamics, class identity, social status and influences of economic as well as cultural and educational hegemony.

## Keywords

Marxist literary criticism, Marxist literary theory, Sally Rooney, Irish literature

## Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce zkoumá romány Sally Rooneyové *Rozhovory s přáteli* a *Normální lidé* z pohledu marxistické literární kritiky. Na základě autorčina vlastního výroku, dle kterého ve svém psaní užívá „marxistický rámec“ jako způsob popisu současného světa, si tato práce klade za cíl zanalyzovat již zmíněné romány s ohledem na Marxovu teorii. První část se zaměřuje na teoretický základ a hlavní myšlenky marxismu a marxistické literární kritiky. Dále je v ní nastíněno pojetí společenských tříd v Irsku a stručné představení názorů Sally Rooneyové, za účelem poskytnout kontext pro analýzu daných románů. Druhá část pak zkoumá romány jako takové, včetně jejich příběhů, prostředí, postav a názorů v nich představených. Tyto jsou analyzovány zejména ve vztahu k otázkám základny a nadstavby, silové dynamiky, třídní identity, sociálního postavení a vlivů ekonomické i kulturní a vzdělávací hegemonie.

## Klíčová slova

Marxismus, Marxistická literární kritika, Marxistická literární teorie, Sally Rooneyová, Irská literatura

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## 1. Introduction

Sally Rooney represents a prominent figure of the contemporary Irish literature as well as English-written literature in general. Over the duration of her still young career, she has already become a best-selling author and gained praise with many critics. Among other things, Rooney is commended for her biting wit (Harkin), raw prose (Harris), thought-provoking observations and insightful portrayal contemporary relationships (Sarazen). All of these have made her a person of note across many groups of readers. However, she is often being linked particularly to the millennial generation. In 2018, she has been dubbed as the “the first great millennial author” by *The New York Times* (Barry) and, in 2019, the “voice of the generation” by *The Washington Post* (Sarazen). One of the reasons behind these praising labels is Rooney’s choice of young characters who are coming of age on the pages of her novels while looking for their identity in the contemporary world.

Sally Rooney’s likes to draw on her own experience for the subject matter of her books. Her parents were “passionate about passing on socialist values” (Collins) to their children. Therefore, due to her upbringing Rooney has been inclined to view the world from a socialist perspective (Ingle). A transformative experience occurred for Rooney when she began to attend college. There she became aware of the various theoretical frameworks that fit with the mindset her parents passed on to her. In a podcast interview from 2019, she discloses that “a lot of the intellectual world opened up for [her] at that point” (Fischer). In an interview with Sophie Murguia from 2019, Rooney describes being interested in considering things from the perspective of different theoretical frameworks, including feminist and Marxist theory. On this topic, Rooney states: “the framework of class, because it’s so central to how I conceptualize the society that we live in, had to be very central to how I went about observing the world of the book” (Murguia).

Rooney’s inclination to consider things from the perspective of Marxist theory has become the primary inspiration behind this diploma thesis, as it represents a point of view I too find particularly interesting to employ when it comes to literature. It intrigues me to consider things within a broader context of the historical period and society. I am likewise prone to searching for cause and effect, whenever given the chance, in order to gain a better understanding of the individual elements, but also of the issue as a whole. All of these elements were already present in my bachelor thesis discussing the topic women and social class in Victorian social problem novels of Elizabeth Gaskell. With this theses, I would like to set my sight on examining contemporary stories which, nevertheless, feature a number of similar traits, beginning with the preoccupation with social class and ending with a complex portrayal of characters and their relationships. To this end, I believe that Marxist literary criticism will serve as a fitting tool to examine Sally Rooney’s novels not only with regard to the framework the author claims to have embedded in them, but also with regard to the principles that

appeal to me personally. Therefore, the main hypothesis behind this thesis is as follows. Sally Rooney's novels, *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018), incorporate a Marxist framework in their structure which can be uncovered by the means of analysing the stories and their characters from the perspective of Marxist literary criticism. The main objective of the thesis will thus be to either confirm or disprove this claim through the study of theoretical concepts and the novels themselves.

The theoretical part of this thesis will focus on answering queries necessary to properly examine the two aforementioned novels. Firstly, we must inquire into one vital issue which is about the role of Marxism as a school of thought in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The influence and status of Marxism has without doubt changed throughout the course of history, which is why we also need to ask what its implications are, mainly in contemporary context. For these purposes, the thesis will aim to investigate key principles of Marxism and Marxist theory within the context of its historical origin and ethical implications. Next, there will be explored the contemporary dimension of Marxism, in order to shed a light on it being a significant force behind Sally Rooney's beliefs as well as a notable presence in her novels. Additionally, Marxism will be examined from the viewpoint of its treatment of culture, since literature, and therefore Marxist literary theory, belongs to it. The philosophical background of Marxism will be studied using and Eric Hobsbawm's *How to Change the World Reflections on Marx and Marxism* (2011), Terrell Carver and James Richard Farr's *The Cambridge Companion to the Communist Manifesto* (2015) will provide us with an insight into the historical dimension of Marxism and Tom Bottomore's *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (1983) will be employed to examine the key concepts affiliated with Marxist theory.

All of this ought to provide a basis for a study of Marxist theory and the succeeding section will thus be able to study Marxist literary criticism as such. Namely, we ought to identify what it is and on what foundation it was established. Next, there needs to be determined how to apply Marxist literary theory to the study of literature. To this end, this section of the thesis, will examine its core principles, the questions it raises in connection to literature and its areas of interest. This part of the thesis will, among others, draw on literary theory extracted from Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan's *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (1998), which will allow us to study the main principles of Marxist literary criticism. Next, Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne's *Marxism Literary Theory: A Reader* (1996) will provide us with information about the historical development of Marxist literary theory and the corresponding areas of interest connected with each period. Lastly, Julian Wolfrey's *Key Concepts in Literary Theory* (2001) and Barbara Foley's *Marxist Literary Criticism Today* (2019) will be examined to determine the implications of Marxist literary criticism when applied to a literary analysis in practice.

Further on, this thesis will seek an answer to the question on how to interpret the environment of Rooney's novels and its influences on her writing. Therefore, as to better comprehend the setting and the background of the characters portrayed in the two novels, there will be featured a brief probe into the condition of Ireland and its society, including the conception of social classes and the presence of class discrimination. For information about the historical development of Ireland and its people, this section will draw on Richard Breen's *Understanding Contemporary Ireland: State, Class, and Development in the Republic of Ireland* (1990), Senia Pašeta's *Modern Ireland: a Very Short Introduction* (2003), Thomas Bartlett's *The Cambridge History of Ireland* (2018). These sources will then be supplied by a number of articles from Irish journalists, as to gain a better understanding of Ireland's contemporary state. The studied articles will include, for example, Katherine Donnelly's "Social Class and Postcode Determine Students' Access to Highly Paid Careers" (2020) and Anthony O'Halloran's "In Irish Education It's All about Your Class" (2002).

Since the identity of the author is an important factor to Marxist literary criticism, in the last chapter of the theoretical part, the following questions ought to be asked. First, we ought to identify the role of Sally Rooney's own personal experience and opinions, in order to determine the way it translates into her writing. As to propose potential answers to these, there will be briefly introduced Sally Rooney's claims and ideas, her background and other influences for the sake of providing more context to her as an author and her fiction. To find these answers, this chapter will draw on a multitude of articles about the author, such as the already mentioned article by Sophie Murguia "How Sally Rooney Took a Coming-of-Age Novel and Turned It into an Important Cultural Commentary" (2019) or Lauren Collins' "Sally Rooney Gets in Your Head" (2018), as well as interviews that have been conducted with the author herself, such as the interview "Sally Rooney on Writing with Marxism" for The Louisiana Channel (2019) or "Appel Salon" for Toronto Public Library (2019) featured on *YouTube*.

The practical part will then employ this research in order to provide a comprehensive study of *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* from the viewpoint of Marxist literary criticism. The primary sources for this part of the thesis will be the texts of two novels themselves supplied by the findings from the theoretical part. The practical part will consist of three principal sections which will, for the most part, be preoccupied with the novels' focal points of interest, those being, namely, the characters, their relationships and the environment surrounding them. The first two sections will take on the task of examining the novels separately following the order of publication. That is to say, first, there will be studied Rooney's debut novel *Conversations with Friends* and the same procedure will then be employed in the case of *Normal People*, the author's second novel. As to apply the Marxist theory onto the study of the novels, we shall examine the class structure portrayed in them.

To this end, we ought to inquire into the correlation between the characters' personalities, motivations and other aspects of life as determined by their social class background and social standing. The third and final section of the practical part will set the novels side by side in order to look at them from a more comprehensive point of view. We will contrast the novels and explore their parallels and differences, as to gain a better understanding of the Marxist perspective Rooney embedded in their structure. To this end, we shall examine in what way the previously-explored individual elements, such as the social class and its effects on the characters, play within the broader context of the stories, but also the portrayed ideological system and Marxist theoretical concepts in general.

## THEORETICAL PART

### 2. Marxism as a philosophy

Before this thesis can delve into the contemplation of Marxism as a literary theory, there ought to be first delineated Marxism as a philosophy within its own right. Karl Marx's musings not only became the cornerstone of Marxist literary criticism but they are also the key to accurately comprehending Sally Rooney's authorial intent further on in this thesis. Marxist doctrine bridges into a variety of fields but it is most commonly regarded as either a political philosophy, economical philosophy or social science in general. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, just the label of Marxism still remains a polarising subject matter that elicits strong emotions mostly due to its past and present associations.

Nevertheless, the significance of *The Communist Manifesto*, in whatever light we may see it, is almost impossible to dispute. Published for the first time in 1848, it was labelled as "the most influential single text written in the nineteenth century" (Osborne), by virtue of having a serious impact on the course of human history. In it, Marx addressed "general propositions about politics, society, humanity, technology, labor, production, economics, trade, morality, family, women, ideas, action, class, war, peace, government, nationhood and much else" (Carver & Farr 22). Over the course of his life, Marx continued developing his thoughts on these issues and thus lay the foundation to what became known as Marxist theory. Marx did so with the contribution of Friedrich Engels. Who, took over the work after his death as many other did later. Much of what is nowadays widely considered to be Marxism or Communism is therefore an amalgamation of various interpretations of Marx's philosophy rather than his own contemplations and reflections upon the world.

Despite the broad spectrum of fields and topics covered by Marxism, there can be pointed several unifying elements, which can simultaneously be seen as Marx's paramount contributions to our understanding of the world. First and utmost, it is his pioneering recognition and description of the system commonly known as capitalism (Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* xi). Through capitalism the economically dominant class, also called the bourgeoisie, traditionally maintains its power over the inferior working class, also called the proletariat. Due to its insurmountable differences, represented primarily by their "materially contending interests" (Marx, Engels & Stedmand 13), the two classes are thus predetermined to clash. The bourgeoisie strives to preserve its privileged position, while the proletariat strives for an emancipation. Marx views this conflict to be the driving power of history as expressed by his famous quote "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx, Engels & Stedmand 219). The last part of Marx's core thesis is a prediction

of the future of this discord. According to Marx's vision, the class struggle would at some point "inevitably produce a revolution followed by a classless society" (Rockmore 90).

Marxist philosophy continues to resonate with people more than a century and half later after *The Communist Manifesto* was published. While some ideas proposed by Marx have assuredly become dated and irrelevant as the time passed, others can still be applied to today's world (Rockmore x). At the forefront, there ought to be mentioned Marx's identification and description of the system we know as capitalism. While its form has undoubtedly altered since Marx's times, its substance has persisted along with the system's shortcomings which have only augmented over time. It could be argued that, perhaps, these are the main reasons as to why Marxism still has not disappeared into obscurity and continues to be such a polarising topic. Furthermore, it may also serve as an argument as to why it is worth contemplating Marx's work from the modern perspective as well, rather than viewing it just as an artifact of history and the events of 20<sup>th</sup> century it usually connotes.

The following sub-chapters will deal with the relevance of Marxism in three areas which are crucial to providing a complex picture of Marxism as a school of thought. As to understand the reemergence, and even more importantly the relevance, of Marxism in the recent decades (O'Carroll), it is essential to first discuss the origin of Marxism in historical context. Situating Marxist beliefs on the background of its development over the course of time and accompanying circumstances will allow us to examine its thoughts and implications in their complexity. Lastly, it is equally indispensable to address the intricate relationship of Marxism and culture, especially literature, before commencing to inquire into Marxism as a literary theory.

## **2.1 The origin of Marxism and its historical dimension**

*The Communist Manifesto* itself was in many ways a product of historical events which marked the period of Marx and Engels' lives. With the arrival of the Industrial revolution and the turbulent period of French revolution, there slowly originated the demand for "a new interpretation of freedom" that would stretch beyond a mere "equality before the law" (Caver & Farr; 55). As a student of Hegelian philosophy, Marx put emphasis on the concept of freedom which he viewed "as a function of the development of the economy" (Rockmore 170). The assumption that these matters were irrevocably linked was affirmed shortly after *The Communist Manifesto* was published in 1848. This period is well known because of the wave of largely unsuccessful revolutions which swept through Europe and demanded more liberties due to the dire economic and political conditions of that time.

The significance of the motif of liberty is also expressed in Kamenka's book *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism*, first published in 1962. The author offers an interesting hypothesis to the

initial influence behind Marx's turn towards Communism and formulation of his theory. He argues that Marx "came to Communism in the interests of freedom" as "he sought to free himself from the pressure exercised by the mediocre German police state of Frederick William IV" (xii). Should this hypothesis considered as legitimate, it would appear as quite an ironical parallel to the totalitarian regimes, labelling themselves as Marxist ones, arising after Marx's death.

Rather than on any principles of "subjective moral demand" (Bottomore 178), Marx based his entire work primarily on his material conception of history. Marx considered subjective moral demands to be powerless in the face of history driven towards the imminent emancipation of society. According to many critics, ethics therefore came to be a fairly neglected part of Marxist philosophy (Bidet & Kouvelakis 137) despite the fact that moral motivations most certainly were one of the factors that drove Marx to develop his theory in the first place. Nevertheless, there are ethical valuations which can be inferred from Marx's works. Those are primarily moral principles associated with the negative effects of capitalism. That is, for instance, the transgression of "exploitation of man by man" and "the reification of social relations between human beings as relations between 'things'" (Bottomore 178).

Lastly, in connection to the historical context of Marxism, there also ought to be a brief mention of the continuation of Marxism after the death of Marx and Engels. Expanded upon by their disciples and later many others, Marxism took on various forms which were often beyond the scope of the authors' own life experiences and previsions. As Hobsbawm states "seventy years after Marx's death, one-third of the human race lived under regimes ruled by communist parties which claimed to represent his ideas and realise his aspirations" (4). Nevertheless, what globally become known as Marxism, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had largely been based on various interpretations and revisions of the original thoughts which were propagated by totalitarian regimes built upon the ideologies of Leninism, Stalinism and Maoism (Hobsbawm 7).

## **2.2 Marxism in contemporary context**

Marxist thoughts and a Marxist perspective are substantially present in Sally Rooney's writing despite her a 21<sup>st</sup>-century writer when it comes to her attitudes and her selection of topics. In order to be able to delve into the author's relationship and perception of Marxist thinking later on in this thesis, we ought to first examine the presence and meaning of Marxism in the context of our contemporary world.

In the light of the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it would be absurd to oppose the claim that the versions of Marxism that were so far put to practice have proven to be deficient systems which, in the majority of cases, ultimately failed in some way. Therefore, we might justly question whether

Marx's thoughts still hold any relevance and value nowadays. Even more perplexing might be the recent rising popularity of Marx's thoughts as indicated by the publishing of various books, as well as the surge in public discourse on the topic. This subchapter will therefore explore possible reasons for these aforementioned issues.

One of the aspects that allows many to identify with *The Communist Manifesto*, but with other Marx's thoughts as well, is the fact that the actual structure of our society has barely changed from the enticing description in the opening passage. Much of our society can still be divided into those who are affluent and those who are lacking resources. There are still those who possess influence and those who are left powerless, or as Marx put it the "oppressor and oppressed" (Carver & Farr 25). As Eagleton points out in his book *Why Was Marx Right*, published in 2011, even though the "traditional industrial manufacture" has slowly been transformed into "a 'postindustrial' culture of consumerism, communications, information technology and the service industry" (4), it would be difficult to argue that such inequality no longer exists. According to an article published by the Oxfam International organisation in 2020, "the world's richest 1% have more than twice as much wealth as 6.9 billion people." The data reveals a persisting inequality of wealth distribution, in the light of which, the Marxist critique points to capitalism being the root of this global disparity. Due to its emphasis on vigorous pursuit of individual gain, it enables the extreme accumulation of capital among a small group of individuals. Those oftentimes have little inclination to redistribute the amassed capital, instead opting to continue in its accumulation and maintenance of its wealth-induced power.

Therefore, in the face of the state of modern capitalism and its effects, the main relevance of Marxism certainly remains its accurate critique of the capitalist system (Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* 2). Capitalism has been becoming increasingly more globalised and the accumulated wealth has been generating "extreme economic inequality within countries and between regions" (Hobsbawm 11). In theory, our productive capability has made it possible for most of us to achieve general welfare, monetary prosperity, education, etc. However, the majority of the world's inhabitants have yet far to reach such a state. As Eagleton proposes "avid self-interest is likely to pile up wealth with remarkable speed, though it is likely to amass spectacular poverty at the same time" (16). Even more urgently, the expansion of capitalism equally pits against each other the preservation of our environment and the principles of free market which dictate "maximum continuing growth in the search for profit" (Hobsbawm 12).

Though by no means complete, even such a list of these pressing contemporary matters might give a reason to the emerging interest in Marx's thoughts, as it was him, who managed to eerily predict much of it (Menand). For the purpose of this thesis, it is necessary to mention the 'renaissance' of Marxism as a philosophy, social science and economic critique in the western part of the world,

which has been considered to traditionally uphold the opposing values. For younger generations, to which Rooney as a millennial certainly belongs, the labels of Communism and Marxism<sup>1</sup> no longer hold such strong political connotations as they did in the past (Jeffries). In this period, it is thus possible to look upon Marx's theories with fresh eyes and consider some of his observations in the discourse revolving around the critique of the capitalist system and all it brings (Rockmore xiii).

As Rockmore suggests in his book *Marx After Marxism* "it is probable that [Marx's] books will be worth reading as long as capitalism lasts" (x - xi). Today, in particular, Marxist theory may be a beneficial tool for seeking the solutions to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century issues especially if employed as a critique of capitalism. Posing Marxist questions in this context can provide us with an insight into the causes and conditions of current state of the world (Hobsbawm 15). However, the contemplation of any possible resolutions to the state of the contemporary society confined by late capitalism is a point for a discussion that is very much beyond the scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, it remains a fact that these issues and existential questions arising from them lie heavily on the mind of Sally Rooney and in turn, they haunt her characters and tend to re-surface in the narrative structure and environment of her stories.

## 2.3 Marxism and culture

Marxism as such is predominantly more interested in politics or economy than in culture, in the sense of arts and literature. By the virtue of the time period in which he lived, Marx was above all concerned with the practical dimension of reality and making his philosophy employable in practice. He therefore remained hesitant in the capacity of "'literature' and 'the aesthetic'" to be applied in a practical manner (Williams 52) and paid little attention to it in his writings. Those who later continued to expand on Marx's thoughts often settled this absence of explicitly formulated theory by attempting to unite the ideology and arts (Williams 52) which thus resulted in the propagation of art's instrumental function.

The conception of culture within the framework of Marxist theory is considered to be dual. On the one hand, there is the aforementioned function of culture as "a propagandist weapon in the class struggle" (Bottomore 128). Those who produce art in a society do not, in most cases, use it to pass on any significantly subversive thoughts. In turn, such art allows for the perpetuation of the status quo (Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* 114) which is "bound up with the interests of the dominant

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis uses the term 'Marxism' to designate the ideas associated directly with Karl Marx's body of work and his conception of world, as opposed to 'Communism' which is used to label the final utopic form of society towards which Marxism strives; 'Communism' is also employed as a broad term designating the political establishments which emerged over the course of the 20th century and which are oftentimes publicly associated with the label as such.

social classes” (Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* 115). The second conception is the vision of culture as “a reflection of an economic base” (Bottomore 128). It is the latter that is of a particular interest to this thesis as it presents the foundational principle of Marxist literary theory.

Through this lens, it is impossible to look upon culture as an independent entity that can be understood on its own. Therefore, as to fully interpret culture from the viewpoint of Marxist theory, there ought to be always considered its full context (Rivkin & Ryan 644). In other words, it is essential to interpret culture within the broader circumstances of the historical period in which it was created. Such context includes a plethora of affiliated aspects, such the social conditions of the time, the status and class-affiliation of the author, etc. Upon analysis, culture and literature can thus provide us with a unique testimony about the era in which they were created. The undeniable evidence of this is rather ironically, Marx and his body of work itself. As pointed out earlier in this thesis, and as Rivkin and Ryan state in their book, the fact that “Marx was deeply influenced by his historical context is itself a lesson in Marxist methodology” (644). Surrounded by political oppression, the boom of the Industrial Revolution and taxing impacts of the budding capitalism, Marx aimed much of his work to counterpart these factors which weighed on him greatly. Were he born into a different time and age, the Marxist theory could have been preoccupied with a different set of issues altogether.

### 3. Marxist literary criticism

In the previous chapter, in order to provide an insight into the conception Marxism in general, a number of Marxism's essential aspects and fundamental beliefs has been examined. Now, that there has been determined the philosophical and ideational background of Marxism, as well as its historical, contemporary and cultural dimension, this thesis can proceed to address Marxism solely in relation to literature. As to be able to later analyse Sally Rooney's two selected novels, it is vital to first explore the literary theory that will permit us to do so, in accord with the thesis' objective. Since Rooney's beliefs and writing feature various reflections and contemplations of Marx's thoughts, the natural conclusion is to examine it from the viewpoint of literary criticism that was inspired by the same source.

In general terms, Marxist literary theory strives to comprehend the values, thoughts and emotions which people experience over different periods of time (Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* xiii). For this reason, critics employing this viewpoint contemplate the accompanying factors of the particular piece of writing and attempt to situate it in a broader context. In the book *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, published in 1996, Eagleton proposes the division of Marxist literary criticism into four general streams of anthropological, political, ideological and economic Marxist criticism (Eagleton & Milne, *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* 7), all of which employ a different perspective when inspecting literature.

The categories are established upon areas of interest within the Marxist theory and corresponding historical periods. According to Eagleton, the first stream of anthropological criticism domineered the period of the so-called Second International, between the years 1889–1916. It took interest in topics such as “the relations between art and human labour”, “the function of art within social revolution” and the social functions of art (Eagleton & Milne, *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* 7 - 8). After the Bolshevik revolution, the focus of Marxist criticism gained a predominantly political focus, hence the title of the second stream. Political criticism therefore became “a matter of polemic and intervention” as it aimed to mold the cultural policy of the state and defend its actions (Eagleton & Milne, *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* 9).

Eagleton links the third stream of ideological criticism to a “Western Marxist lineage” (Eagleton & Milne, *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* 10) of thinkers such as György Lukács or Antonio Gramsci, whose contributions will be mentioned later in this chapter. Ideological criticism's primary focus was on “the relation between literary works and forms of social consciousness” (Eagleton & Milne, *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* 11). The last stream of economic criticism has, according to Eagleton, been present in other approaches to Marxist literary criticism throughout its history. Its main area of interest is the theory of Cultural materialism which examines the

relationship between the culture and the conditions in which it was produced (Eagleton & Milne, *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* 11).

The foundation of contemporary Marxist literary criticism emerged in the West in the 1960s and 1970s. During this time a new wave of interest in Left politics and consequently Marxism was prompted by the fall of colonialism. Critics were gradually able to start re-incorporating politics into literary theory. As the pressure of the Cold War's peak began to decline, they were able to draw upon Marxist concepts and vocabulary anew (Rivking & Ryan 643). Into this generation of Marxist theoreticians we may assort critics such as Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton (Rivking & Ryan 643) upon whose works and understanding of Marxist literary theory this thesis draws the most.

The application of Marxist philosophy to literary criticism will be explored in the next sub-chapter in more detail. There will be delineated the treatment of Marxism's fundamental principles in the context of deciphering literature in order to introduce the various viewpoints that will be later adopted in the practical part. This chapter will equally delve into the numerous factors of inquiry of Marxist literary criticism. Lastly, there will be presented several principal concepts of Marxist theory, which can be studied within literary texts, and the appropriate terminology which is to be used later on in this thesis.

### **3.1 Marxism as a means of interpreting literature**

As it was previously mentioned, Marxism as a philosophy is not predominantly interested in culture, in the sense of arts and even less in literature. Nevertheless, historical materialism, which is a term coined by Engels to describe his and Marx's approach to examining society and history (Foley 4), has provided a rich foundation for applying Marxism to literary theory. One of the principal objectives of Marxist literary criticism has therefore become locating literature in the historical context of the period in which it was written (Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* xi). As Marx viewed it, there are "few social phenomena that can be abstracted from history and seen as timeless" (Foley 5). Employing these perspectives thus allows us to understand the links "between and among literature, culture, consciousness, and material reality" (Foley 23) and in turn gain an insight into the particular piece of writing we choose to study.

Since Marxism holds the belief that culture stems from the period in which it originated, Marxist literary maintains that literature can be understood only when the complete picture is taken into consideration. For this reason, in literary analysis, there ought to be investigated the historical context, but also the impact of the economic, social and cultural conditions of the period (Rivking & Ryan 644). This includes attempting to comprehend the influences that shaped the author's views, life and consequently their writing, as well as the underlying ideology behind all of those factors.

Nevertheless, the text itself is not merely an identical image of its time which was precisely recorded by the author. Interpreting literature from the viewpoint of Marxist criticism cannot be reduced to such a straightforward relationship between the piece of writing and the accompanying circumstances. Instead, texts ought to be perceived as meditating the portrait of the world to the reader and thus sculpting the reader's comprehension and attitudes in a certain manner (Wolfreys et al. 64).

The aforementioned double aspect of culture equally comes to play in Marxist literary criticism. That is to say, Marxist literary criticism takes into account the fact that culture arises from circumstances within a particular historical period and its society, as well as that it, simultaneously, conveys the image of the surrounding world to the reader. Some Marxist critics thus focus on interpreting texts as products of the given historical period and its society. They search for the ways in which the language and the choices of authors reveal either conscious or unconscious presence of the dominant ideology (Rivking & Ryan 645). The movement of Cultural materialism, which is associated with the person of Raymond Williams, searches for textual and contextual evidence that would interpret the piece of writing both as "an object produced at a particular time, and an object being consumed in the present" (Wolfreys et al. 27).

In relation to culture, other critics then delve into uncovering how literary texts affirm and promote the status quo (Foley 22) or conversely undermine and challenge the dominant ideology of the time (Rivking & Ryan 645). The role of literature in the social and cultural world of its time is by no means passive. It is engaged in its development since it may either present an illusory image in an attempt to shroud the reality and unify the society, or it may expose the wrongdoings and social contradictions in both explicit or implicit manner (Rivking & Ryan 644).

### **3.2 Principal themes examined by Marxist literary criticism**

Now that we have considered the various angles from which literature can be viewed within Marxist criticism and we have related Marxism as a philosophy to the theory of literature, we may proceed to the examination of selected theoretical concepts. The following subchapters will outline several essential notions which permeate Marxist literary theory and concurrently present the appropriate terminology connected to them. The concepts themselves will be briefly discussed mainly in terms of their implications to literary analysis as to be later studied in Sally Rooney's novels.

#### **3.2.1 Social class**

Since the notion of social class is one of the essential concepts of Marxism, it is only natural that this area represents a significant field of interest to literary critics as well. Broadly speaking, class structure of a society is determined by the distribution of the means of production (Bidet &

Kouvelakis 355). The presence of classes in a society enables the existence of class consciousness, a concept largely developed by György Lukács (Foley 147). Simply put, it is an awareness of one's class membership which may be in conflict with the person's actual class membership (Bottomore 89).

For literary critics, this means examining how those structures and their implications are reflected in literature both deliberately and covertly. Marxist literary analysis thus inquires into the representation of social classes and social structure in a given text. It may pose questions such as, whether the narrative aims to marginalise or silence certain voices. In what manner the text enables the reader to access the mindsets of certain groups and whether it raises any sympathies with them. Next, it may inquire, whether certain classes are portrayed favourably and truthfully and whether the reader's perception of those classes is being influenced by the narrative and if so, then to what end (Foley 124). It may lead the critics to ask, whether the class stratification results in alienation of the characters and examine its consequences (Wolfreys et al. 6).

However, social class does not relate to only the social classes represented in the piece of writing itself. The social-class status and other group membership of the author may have a significant impact on the manner in which the given text should be read. The critic Lucien Goldman poses the opinion that text is to be viewed as “trans-individual mental structures 'of a social group'” which incorporate its shared “structure of ideas, values and aspirations” (Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 29-30). Literary analysis may thus also ask, how these factors are present in the author's writing and what role do they play.

### **3.2.2 Class struggle**

In Marxist theory, society is arranged into two major groups or social classes. In simplified terms, on one side, there are the capitalist owners of the means of production. On the other side, there are the people whose labour-power is bought by the capitalists in order to generate more profit (Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 5). Such division generates inequalities, which in turn creates tension and antagonism between the capitalist bourgeoisie and the working proletariat. This conflict between the two groups is referred to as class struggle (Bidet & Kouvelakis 373). In literary analysis, this implies the aim to uncover the means in which the tension is manifested in the text.

Literary critics may thus explore the given text with a regard to the following areas of interest. There may be analysed in what manner the text chooses to approach various tensions and conflicts stemming from class struggle (Foley 124). Next, there is the issue of exploitation and oppression of the working class by the bourgeoisie and the means through which this is done. The analysis of this field, may include an inquiry into whether the characters struggle to free themselves from it and in

what way they attempt to do so (Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* xii). Additionally, there may be also identified the means through which the ruling class keeps itself in power while using ideology and cultural narratives that assure its legitimacy (Rivkin & Ryan 646) and the manner in which the ideology manifests in the text itself.

### **3.2.3 Base and superstructure**

Another essential concept of Marx's theory is the model of the relationship of the economic reality, or the base, and the individual dimensions which accompany it, or the superstructure (Bidet & Kouvelakis 610). The term of superstructure encompasses various aspects such as cultural production, religious and political life, as well as the entire spectrum of social relations that exist within a society, that is to say the social roles, interactions and relationships of both individuals and groups (Wolfreys et al. 15). The economic base conditions the superstructure and enables its existence. Therefore, any change in the base is reflected in the superstructure as well (Bottomore 45). The philosopher Louis Althusser proposed that the relationship between them is not only one-sided. According to his elaboration on the theory, superstructure has the ability to influence some aspects of the base as well (Rivkin & Ryan 1269).

When the model of base and superstructure is applied to literary interpretation, we primarily explore how the two notions, base and superstructure, manifest in the given text. Literary critics may inquire into the relationship between the base and the superstructure in the narrative and examine their manifestations. There may be examined, in what manner the base enables the existence of the superstructure and shapes it. Next area of interest, may present the way in which the base interacts with the superstructure in the text. Similarly, there may be examined in what manner the cultural practices and belief systems of the superstructure manifest in the text and whether the text itself a manifestation of the superstructure of the author's period (Foley 19).

### **3.2.4 Hegemony**

The last vital notion that is to be examined in this chapter is Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. In simple terms, it is the power through which the dominant social classes maintain their influence over the subordinate classes (Castle 28). Hegemony thus plays one of the key roles in the issue of class struggle, as it allows the privileged classes to exercise power over others and even suppress them. The dominance is preserved through ideology, economy, politics, culture, education, etc. (Mulhern 39). By imposing certain cultural values and beliefs on the society as a whole, dominant groups preserve their hegemony in an inconspicuous manner. However, they also do so more coercively through social institutions such as, the church or schools (Wolfreys et al. 49-50).

In literary analysis, this concept brings critics to examining the emergence of hegemony in the given text or even the role it played in the creation of the text. There may be examined matters, such as, the effect of the dominant ideology on the narrative and the characters. Literary critics may also reveal the presence of the ideology itself within the story, along with the institutions through which the ideology exercises its influence. Lastly, there may be an attempt to determine whether the text performs the function of an apology of the hegemony, its critique, or even whether it serves as both (Foley 125).

## 4. Ireland and its society

The previous chapter outlined several selected aspects central to Marxist literary criticism. These key areas of theory were connected to examples queries which may be posed in order to shed some light on the piece of writing we wish to examine. One of the aforementioned areas is the environment shaping the author and their work. In the case of Sally Rooney, the environment of influence is Ireland and its society. The author herself is born and raised Irish, but, moreover, the setting of Ireland marks a significant presence in her novels as well. For this reason, the setting ought to be explored in more detail so that we can better understand the author's own mindset, as well as the values, attitudes and lives of her characters. The following chapter will therefore focus on outlining some of the dominant defining factors of Ireland as a country and its nation, with a particular focus on the changes which occurred in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which is the approximate setting of both of the selected Rooney's novels.

The history of Ireland has been significantly shaped by its closest neighbour the United Kingdom, to whom it belonged up until the previous century and by whom it used to be treated essentially as one of its colonies. After the Act of Union officially joined Ireland to the kingdom of Great Britain (Pašeta 1) at the onset of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the country underwent a tumultuous development in the hundred years that followed. During that time, Ireland witnessed a rise in nationalist tendencies and a blossoming of its culture but it was equally a time of hardship due to the Great Famine, poverty and low standard of living which spurred a mass emigration. In 1921, there emerged two Irelands within one island. One of them became an independent state and one has remained a part of the United Kingdom (Bartlett 1479).

On the outside, the distinction between the two Irelands has often been made on its religious differences. The Catholic faith had been a defining part of Irish identity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Church has played a major role in the nation's strife for independence and later in the state-building process (Bartlett 1578). Early on, Catholicism provided the Irish Free State with a sense of "shared identity and cohesion clearly distinct from protestant England" (Bartlett 1585). However, nowadays, the situation is quite different as the popularity, and in turn the influence, of Catholicism seems to be steadily falling. In 1991 census, there were reported 91.6 % of people who ascribed themselves the status of a Catholic. In 2002, this number dropped to 88.4 % and in 2011 it was as low as 84.2 % indicating a crisis of the faith in traditionally religious Ireland (Bartlett 1634).

In the past, Ireland had also been infamously known for the vast amount of people who decided to leave the island in order to build a better life for themselves beyond its borders. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this number was so enormous that it resulted in a declining population. Mass emigration from Ireland continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and "between 1921 and 2001, 1.5 million people

left Ireland” (Bartlett 1154). The reason for this was the poor economical state of the country and low average income which lead to many workers, particularly unskilled workers from rural areas, to seek employment elsewhere.

A significant improvement of Ireland’s economical state emerged in the mid-1990s and continued up until the early 2010s. The country’s impressive economic growth, fall in unemployment and rise in standard of life earned Ireland the nickname of a Celtic Tiger (Hegarty 513). However, the rapid development came to a staggering halt due to a serious recession in 2009. In Ireland, the global economic crisis was exacerbated by other factors as well. This included Ireland’s decrease in market competitiveness to its Eurozone partners, unsustainably high wages, rapid rise in property prices and the subsequent property crash (Bartlett 1108). In 2010, the government was thus forced to accept a rescue package from the EU along with a set of economy-restraining conditions. The economic crisis in Ireland lead to a renewal in the rise of unemployment and emigration (Bartlett 1109).

#### **4.1 Development of social classes in Ireland**

According to the Joe Horgan’s article from 2021, a large part of the Irish society holds a false belief that the Republic of Ireland has no class system. Other texts, such as Anthony O’Halloran’s (2002) or professor Kathleen Lynch’s article (2020) agree with this grievance, as they call attention to what has become a rather “taboo” subject in Ireland (Lynch). While the social structure of Ireland is different from, for instance, the British one with its traditionally established upper-class nobility, a certain class stratification is still an integral of Irish society (Reville). Despite the misconception that the class system disappeared with the British after the separation into a free state, social classes remain (Horgan). While the delineation between them may be blurred at times, the privilege associated with class, or lack thereof, prevails. That includes particularly wealth, influence on individual’s education, employment and in turn other aspects of one’s life.

Just as in the rest of Europe, in the early modern age of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the most influential group of Ireland’s society was the class of the landlords. The growth of trade and industrialisation gradually brought about a significant change in this structure as it allowed for emergence of new social hierarchies. A growing number of Catholics and Presbyterians began to make a living out these areas of commerce and joined the expanding ranks of middle-classes (Pašeta 2). However, in Ireland, the rate of industrialisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was quite slow in comparison to the rest of the United Kingdom, possibly due to scarcity of resources such as coal and iron, as well as lack of “an entrepreneurial culture in the largely Catholic south of the country” (Pašeta 33).

The consequences of this development stayed with Ireland well after its division into two countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite their shared history with the Great Britain, the two parts of Ireland were fairly dissimilar in terms of their economy and class structure. At that time, due to its largely rural and agricultural economy, the south of Ireland had a significant class of farmers and agricultural workers, while the north's character was more industrial (Breen and Whelan 320). The process of industrialisation and economic growth of the country was a lengthy and arduous process, as it was mentioned in the previous chapter.

The remnants of this historical development have persisted well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and even today. While the importance of agriculture and unskilled manual labour had been steadily declining between the years 1961 and 1991, the censuses from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century still showed that there was a considerable size of the agricultural and lower middle classes in the Republic of Ireland, especially in comparison to the north (Breen and Whelan 321).

In their book from 1990, Breen and other co-authors put forward the thesis that Ireland's late and rapid development caused the wealth of the country to be unequally distributed thus causing tensions between the country's social classes (x). This view is also supported by Bartley and Kitchin in their book from 2007, who claim that "the growth of the economy and new wealth are highly uneven and unequal across the country" (19-20) with the majority of capital distributed between only four major cities. In her 2004 article, Fionola Meredith argued that inequality was on the rise as a result of "unequal income distribution". All of this evidence allows to come to one conclusion. Wealth, and particularly new wealth, and economic status have become the dominant influence on the perceived class and status in the present-day Ireland. In fact, Meredith, as well as other Irish journalists, came to the same conclusion in articles covering this topic.

## **4.2 Classism and regional discrimination in Ireland**

As the previous chapter pointed out, there are several prominent factors which ascribe a higher social status to an individual in the Republic of Ireland. Those factors are mainly a person's affluence, income, ownership of property but also their non-rural origin, which is often revealed by their accent. The influence of Ireland's social structure is primarily reflected in two major sectors that in turn determine other prospects of one's life. Those sectors are that of education and employment, both of which have been greatly debated in connection to one's class (Donnelly).

In his 2002 article, Anthony O'Halloran pointed out that students attending private, fee-paying schools, benefit from this privilege when attending university. Since that year, not much has changed. An article from 2019 confirms that between "between 25 and 30 per cent of new undergraduates at Trinity and UCD", two major Irish universities, come from the private sector of education (O'Brien).

What is even more astonishing is that those private-school students actually make less than 10 per cent of all the students who take the leaving Cert exam every year. Yet the number of those who proceed to attend a higher education is so disproportionate in comparison to the other students from non-private schools (Connolly).

The geographical factor of Ireland's social structure also comes to play in this context. Two-thirds of private schools are located in the Dublin area (McCarthaigh), particularly the south Dublin area. Moreover, 90 per cent, or even more, of the students from the wealthiest parts of the capital progress to third-level education institutions. In other 'disadvantaged' parts of Dublin, the number of students is as low as between 20-25 per cent or even less. In contrast, the institutes of technology in "Athlone, Galway-Mayo, Tralee, Letterkenny and Waterford", which are located in other counties of Ireland, are attended by less than 1 per cent of private-school students (O'Brien). These numbers clearly illustrate the class gap that exists in the education and subsequently determines prospects for employment.

According to O'Halloran's article, Irish universities are "run by the middle-class for the middle-class" which makes those in charge unable to relate to experiences of underprivileged students. In a survey conducted by *The Irish Times* in 2019, doctor Catherine Rossiter voices her agreement with the fact that class represents an issue in Irish education ('Class and education in Ireland: 'Disadvantaged students cannot thrive'). She particularly points out that students from working-class families are at a disadvantage not only due to "financial reasons" but also due to "peer and family expectations, health and family difficulties, low self-confidence and learning self-esteem" all of which hinders their access to education.

Third-level education is only a stepping stone to gaining an employment, however, the Irish are not absolved of discrimination in that environment either. Person's origin and perceived socio-economic background has been so widely debated recently that Sinn Fein introduced a new legislation at the beginning of 2021. The proposed Equality bill aims to prohibit employers from discriminating against job applicants based on their accent and perceived socio-economic status. The reason for this is that accent often plays a role as an indicator of person's regional origin and in turn of the socio-economic status of the area (Fox). In Ireland, regional accents dominate but similarly to the United Kingdom a certain 'neutrality' of accent is perceived as an advantage in employment. It hardly comes a surprise that the people who speak with accents perceived as working-class accents are often considered to be less educated and qualified (Murphy).

The presence of a certain regional prejudice is evident even in the popularity of the two following slang expressions. The first one is the word 'culchie' which has become one of the most widespread representatives of the Irish vernacular (Flynn). Originally a pejorative expression, culchie

designates a person from rural Ireland. As any other trite label, it may carry a number of stereotypical assumptions, though for some it has come to represent a proud identity mark. However, inhabitants of other counties are just as prone to label others. That includes nicknaming Dubliners as ‘Jackeens’ which is a “contemptuous designation for a self-assertive worthless fellow” (Flynn).

## 5. Sally Rooney and her writing

The final subject matter that ought to be discussed in the practical part of this thesis is the person of the author herself. As the examination of Marxist literary theory has pointed out, the author represents an integral part of the particular text's meaning. Therefore, before we can proceed to study her novels, we first need to inquire into Sally Rooney's life, background and motivations in more detail in order to shed a light on her writing.

Rooney grew up and lived in the rural west of Ireland in the town of Castlebar in County Mayo, before she moved to Dublin to attend Trinity College as "the only girl from her school" (White). Her father "fixed phone lines for a living" (Christensen), according to her own words, and her mother was a teacher at a local arts center. They were both "voracious readers" (Christensen) and their daughter was thus allowed to cultivate her literary sensibility since an early age.

Among her literary influences, Rooney herself often mentions her fondness for the 19<sup>th</sup> century novels of Jane Austen or George Elliot. She admits that the time and social setting of these novels is quite distant to her own life experience. However, she is fascinated with their portrayal of characters and relationships to which Rooney herself gives the center stage in her stories. Many critics have pointed out that in this sense Rooney's novels are "basically nineteenth-century novels dressed up in contemporary clothing" (Marks).

Another significant stream of Rooney's literary inspiration are 20<sup>th</sup>-century American writers. Her own writing style and stories are often compared to that of J. D. Salinger and Rooney herself confesses that she particularly likes "the way he described interpersonal connections" with characters who are "intellectual, unhappy people, talking endlessly and writing to each other about their feelings" (Fischer). Another example of an influential writer whose echo can be discerned in Rooney's style is Earnest Hemingway. Her writing has also been compared to his, namely in the context of Hemingway's signature "depressive" and "evacuated style" which oftentimes pushes the reader to fill in the blanks due to the scarcity of details (Crain).

Rooney's parents were also very "passionate about passing on socialist values" to their three children (Collins). On multiple occasions, Rooney admitted she was brought up in a household with socialist ethics but it was at Trinity where she actually encountered Marx's body of work for the first time. Due to her upbringing, she related to much of the Marxist theory and ultimately it was this experience that made her self-proclaimed Marxist. The Marxist theory has intrigued Rooney to such a degree that she later began to incorporate it into her writing as a means of interpreting the world that surrounds her (Murguia). In an interview with the Louisiana Channel, Rooney declares: "In my own life, the way that I think about the world that we live in is mostly through a sort of Marxist framework." However, Rooney is also self-critical when it comes to this aspect of her writing. In the

interview, she then goes on to voice her turmoil about uniting the Marxist outlook with writing fiction and her ability to translate it into the framework of her books.

At Trinity, Rooney studied English and sociology, which is a focus often emerging in her stories. She also became a member of a debating team and earned the title of “the number one competitive debater on the continent of Europe” (Brockes). It was an experience which indirectly started her writing career when she wrote an essay on the emptiness and vague offensiveness of the discipline (Brockes). Her past of a competitive debater, however, is still present in her rhetorical style of writing accompanied by a biting wit, as well as by the attention she gives to current global issues on the pages of her novels.

Rooney’s experience at Trinity was strongly influenced by her own class background and socialist sensitivity. She confessed that she was not “prepared for was encountering the class of people who run the country” and for a long time, she strived to prove herself to them to be just as good (Collins). Her first two novels, which are to be later studied, are set in the same environment Rooney encountered. Their creation was largely driven by the author’s encounter with this experience which brought Rooney to become more aware of the class stratification that surrounded her. Making use of her own knowledge of the social system and Marxist theory, Rooney wishes “to show the reality of a social condition as it is connected to broader systems” (Collins) by the means of her writing.

Yet, Rooney admits that her intention is not to be didactic in any way. She has declared that she does not view her novels as having any potentially political power. Rooney believes that nowadays the role of books is only that of a commodity. In the previously mentioned interview with the Louisiana Channel, she plainly states that she does not “know what it means to write a Marxist novel”, although she would “love to know.” In spite of Rooney’s hesitancy about her novels being ‘Marxist’ enough, they do bear a strong imprint of the way she conceptualises “the society that we live in” with the framework of class being one of the central issues (Murguia). She declares: “The best I can do is to try and observe how class, as a very broad social structure, impacts our personal and intimate lives” (‘Sally Rooney on Writing with Marxism’). Altogether, these assertions imply that while Sally Rooney has her reservations about her novels being able to wield influence as vessels of any Marxist ideology, she is simultaneously committed to employing Marxist theory in her writing. As the practical part will examine, the ‘Marxism’ in her novels is thus centered on the characters and their relationships, rather than being a probe into the Irish society at large or even an audacious expression of a political agenda.

## PRACTICAL PART

As discussed in the previous chapter, Rooney's perspective of the world, and consequently its image she mediates to the reader through her novels, is irrevocably linked to her own experience and beliefs. She wrote her first two novels, *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, with heightened sensitivity to the existence of various social hierarchies, social and economic institutions, as well as their impact. While Rooney was already receptive towards these issues thanks to her upbringing, it was attending college that served as the impulse to approach the frameworks of "Marxist social theory, Marxist cultural theory, and economics" (Murguia) in a systematical manner. In result, the author began to wonder "how to apply these theories to the world that [she] saw around [her]"<sup>2</sup> (Murguia). Eventually, Rooney turned to writing, which became the vessel for these efforts. The influence of Rooney's class-sensitive outlook and awareness of Marxist theory are discernible in the underlying structure of the novels. The protagonists, around which she chooses to build her stories, are in many ways products of their social conditions. Their character and in turn their beliefs, choices and interrelationships are largely molded by their station in life, as well as the society and environment surrounding them. Therefore, the practical part of this thesis will examine Rooney's novels through the lens of Marxist literary theory in order to discover this structure within them.

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<sup>2</sup> Sally Rooney's own words given in an interview "How Sally Rooney Took a Coming-of-Age Novel and Turned It Into an Important Cultural Commentary" with Sophie Muguira

## **6. *Conversations with Friends***

*Conversations with Friends*, Sally Rooney's debut novel, came out in 2017. It is a bildungsroman set in Ireland amidst the financial crisis of 2010s. The story revolves around Frances who is a twenty-one-year-old college student and an aspiring poet. The reader follows Frances and Bobbi, her best friend and ex-girlfriend, as they are befriended by a slightly older married couple of Melissa and Nick. The two young friends are drawn into the captivating world of bourgeois society with various parties and spirited intellectual discussions about current affairs. Just as Bobbi takes a fancy to Melissa, Frances finds herself drawn to Nick. Shortly, Frances becomes engaged in an extramarital affair with him. The stage is thus set for the complex interrelationships and the dynamics of the four principal characters which lie at the heart of the story. Burdened by the uncertainty of her material situation and impacts of her upbringing, Frances clashes with her friends and family just as much as she depends on them to sustain her. As she searches for her place in the unstable world, she is required to face the conflict of her rigorous, but naive, belief system and her actual self.

### **6.1 Social class and condition in *Conversations with Friends***

*Conversations with Friends* revolves around the dynamic of the four leading characters whose relationship represents one of the central elements of the story. The characters come from various social backgrounds which shape the sets of principles through which they conduct themselves. In many aspects, the novel is equally about Frances' search for identity and individuality in the contemporary world which is, to a great degree, still defined by prevalent social-class structures.

Since the novel itself is heavily character-focused rather than plot-driven, the following subchapters will thus examine the four characters of Frances, Bobbi, Nick and Melissa. The primary focus will, however, be on Frances as the protagonist through whose point of view the novel is narrated and around whom the novel revolves. Marxist literary theory leads us to inquire into the origin of a person, in terms of their class-affiliation, social status, familial origin, and all the factors that influenced the formulation of their personality, identity and motions. The following section will thus aim to determine the role of these factors on the principal set of characters in the novel.

#### **6.1.1 Social class delineation at the onset of the novel**

The very opening of the novel takes on the task to subtly delineate the class hierarchy and social standing of the characters, thus allowing the reader to take a first peak at their personality. The presence of a certain social class disparity is tangible right from the moment when the reader is introduced to the leading cast of characters. Those are Frances and Bobbi, long-time friends and presently young college students, and Marisa and Nick, a married couple in their thirties. Through

Frances' eyes, the first chapter relates to the reader their life-changing meeting which establishes the foundation of their interrelationships and consequently allows the rest of the story to unfold.

Frances and Bobbi are captivated by their encounter with Melissa who appears to be rather glamorous, sophisticated and most importantly unlike any of their other acquaintances. Melissa's initial allure stems primarily from her position as a magazine editor, photographer and essayist, which lends her a certain power over the duo of young friends. The admiration distinctly shows in Frances' narration, despite the fact that she generally prefers to style herself and her narration as rather detached. She observes Melissa using "a big professional camera" with "lots of different lenses" (3), remarks on her being "slightly famous" and "rich" (4). By showing interest in Frances and Bobbi's poetry performance, Melissa uses the power of her social standing, as well as her personal charm, to captivate their attention. The interest of a person such as her, flatters the two young students. They are thus right from the beginning taken aback by Melissa's allure which exhibits through her air of sophistication and grandiose act towards Bobbi and Frances. The power of Melissa's persona of a cultured socialite is one that is imparted on her by the virtue of her affluence and bourgeois background. Due to Melissa's class-induced magnetism, the ordinarily aloof Frances makes an effort to "make [herself] seem charming" (3) and is determined to "try harder to impress Melissa" (9), whereas Bobbi outright declares to "have a crush on her" (10) soon after the first encounter.

Over the course of the book Frances and Bobbi are unable to resist the invitations Melissa extends to them. They are gradually admitted to Melissa and Nick's circle of socialite friends which concurrently opens a doorway to their seemingly dazzling upscale world of social gatherings and sophisticated discussions. However, despite her fascination with the couple and their bourgeois life, Frances experiences a great deal of resentment towards them and their friends, especially at the onset of the story. She labels their house and its interior with attributes such as "artificial" (3) and "kitschy-looking" (4). When Frances observes their house having "a dark wooden bowl filled with ripe fruit" as a decorative piece and a "glass conservatory", she immediately assigns them the scornful label of "rich people" (4). Even though, Frances rashly assigns them a stereotypical label, her assumption is not far from the truth.

### **6.1.2 Social class and condition of Frances and her parents**

Gradually, the novel offers bits and pieces of information revealing the reasons behind Frances' fascination and contempt towards Melissa and Nick's wealth, as well as "rich people" (4) in general. On the surface, her stance could be ascribed to her rigorous set of beliefs with which she attempts to conduct herself. The narrative reveals early on that Frances likes to consider herself "a communist" (6). The belief system of Frances' character will be repeatedly touched upon in later

chapters, but for now, it is suffice to say that her belief system and expressed opinions are not always consistent with the course of her actions. Instances of Frances' contradictory conduct ranges from her 'mere' fascination with the stereotypically upper-class Nick and Melissa, to her single-minded effort to insert herself into their social circle by cultivating relations with other members of the bourgeoisie. Naturally, such incongruence leads to certain doubts about Frances' sincerity and the strength of her conviction.

To shed a light on this issue, it is necessary to inquire into the origin of Frances' values. To this end, as it was discussed in the chapter on social class, the Marxist literary theory directs us to inquire into Frances' social background and therefore her class origin. The members of the bourgeoisie demonstrate their class-conscious bias towards Frances already early on in the story. When Frances introduces herself to Nick and Melissa's friends, she discloses that her "parents live in Ballina" (56), which is a County Mayo town of approximately ten thousand inhabitants. This statement is immediately met with a derogatory comment made by one of the men present: "So you're a culchie. (...) I didn't think Nick had culchie friends" (56). Such remark openly displays the perceived social gap between Frances and the present bourgeois company. It demonstrates that Frances is primarily viewed in terms of her inferior social status of a young student with rural working-class family background. This preconception is particularly ingrained in Nick and Melissa's affluent social circle to which Frances and Bobbi are granted an entry but to which they are never fully initiated. Nevertheless, like to the bourgeois characters, Frances possess an equally strong class consciousness which contributes to her inability to integrate herself fully into that society and which will be closely examined in a later chapter.

Frances' social background is further illustrated mostly through scenes involving her divorced parents. There is a stark difference between their mundane homes and the lavish houses where Frances finds herself in the company of Nick and Melissa. There is no substantial description of her mother's house, other than a few mentions of the equipment in it which in Rooney's sparse style may be interpreted as its ordinariness in Frances' eyes. In the commonplace environment of her mother's house and her company, Frances often appears to be more at ease with herself, as she is not molding herself to be someone else in the presence of her newly attained wealthy and cultured acquaintances. In their company, and particularly in Nick's presence, Frances longs to "make [herself] into this kind of person: someone worthy of praise, worthy of love", as if there is "nothing inferior about [her]" (41). Frances' mother easily discerns her daughter's newfound infatuation with her wealthy acquaintances as she admonishes her saying: "It's not like you to get carried away with posh houses" (47). Such comment upsets Frances, since it most likely reminds her of the discrepancy between her established value system and her current behaviour. Frances is well aware that she did, in fact, get

carried away by the 'posh house' of Melissa and Nick, as her mother insinuates. However, even more importantly Frances has slowly been becoming entranced by their way 'posh' of life of its inhabitants in spite of her value system.

A significant but grim prominence is given to the character of Frances' father, Dennis, as well as the description of his home which may be regarded as a symbol of his mental state and general social condition. As Frances enters her father's home, she describes the place smelling of "chip oil and vinegar" (52). There is a formerly patterned carpet which is "now walked flat and brown", a window leading "onto a concrete yard", "unwashed dishes (...) stacked up by the sink" and a "bin (...) spilling small items over the lip of the plastic and onto the floor" (52). The reader learns that Dennis "has some issues with alcohol" (122) as Frances offhandedly puts it. Later on in the novel, the state of the place deteriorates even further along with his mental state as he begins to make drunk calls to his daughter and evade her calls at the same time.

The smell was so rancid that it felt physical, like heat or touch. Several half-eaten meals had accumulated around the table and countertops, in various states of decay, surrounded by dirty tissues and empty bottles. The fridge door was ajar, leaking a triangle of yellow light onto the floor. A bluebottle crawled along a knife which had been abandoned in a large jar of mayonnaise, and four others were batting themselves against the kitchen window. In the bin I could see a handful of white maggots, writhing blindly like boiling rice. (...) Standing in his house was like watching someone familiar smile at me, but with missing teeth. (181-182)

In this grim passage, contrastive to Rooney's otherwise succinct descriptions, the already bleak working-class home becomes outright decaying, foreshadowing what is to come later.

A clear parallel is drawn between the distressing image of Dennis' neglected home and his poor mental state which, undoubtedly, is concurrently its cause. If we wish to uncover the true root of Dennis' dismal condition, we cannot simply put the blame on his alcoholism alone. Throughout the story, there are multiple hints at Dennis' preoccupation and struggle with financial matters. Frances remembers him "him taking money out of [her] Bank of Ireland savings jar" (49) or pawning their television when she was a child. When Dennis calls Frances while being drunk, he inquires: "You're not stuck for money, are you?" and reminds her that saving is "a great habit to get into" (120). Further on, he even ceases to send Frances the monthly allowance she uses to cover her basic needs while at college. He offers no explanation and by ignoring Frances' calls, he avoids any acknowledgment of the impact the action has on his daughter.

In the narrative, Dennis' financial struggle is thus distinctly interwoven with his drinking and mental issues. While it is not disclosed in the text outright, it is easy to regard these factors as induced by his social class and economic situation. Altogether, Dennis is the novel's single most emblematic lower-class character. As it was indicated in the preceding paragraph, he carries many of the almost-cliché traits associated with working-class characters. That is to say, due to his poor material conditions, he becomes a substance-abuser which leads to the dissolution of his family and ultimately the demise of his own mental stability. His actions, however, have even more serious impact on Frances than only the material and financial aspect of things.

As it could be expected, Frances is appalled by her father's living conditions and together with her earlier experiences of his alcohol-induced abusive behaviour she bears a resentment towards him. Dennis recognises it sooner than his daughter becomes aware of it herself when he remarks "you look down on me" (51). Nevertheless, whether she realises it or not, Frances' antipathy is not just personal. Her father's drunkenness makes her "feel unclean" (120) and gradually she comes to associate her father with grim living conditions and dreary financial situation. As a result of his behaviour, Dennis' worries are transferred to Frances. The fear of financial insecurity haunts her even in her dreams when her mother reminds her that "it's expensive to get those things fixed, you know" (96). When Frances eventually comes into some funds, she feels "invincibly wealthy" as if she "finally escaped [her] childhood and [her] dependence on other people", because there is no "no way for [her] father to harm [her] any more" (251). As the story unfolds, it thus becomes obvious that Frances aspires to separate herself from the lower-class social and living conditions experienced by her father by seeking financial independence, but also by inserting herself into Nick and Melissa's bourgeois social circle.

### **6.1.3 Bobbi's social class and condition in contrast to Frances'**

While Bobbi and Frances are often treated as a rather cohesive entity by the other characters of the novel, they are fairly different in terms of their background, class status and consequently their personality. Bobbi and Frances "first met in secondary school" (7) where they forged a lasting friendship that, for a time, was also a romantic relationship. As it was discussed in the previous chapter, Frances' family background is a fairly working-class one. This reality has an effect on both Frances' personality and life priorities. Despite the two friends being quite similar in terms of their belief system and student status, Bobbi's own bourgeois background, however, could not be more different from Frances' which in turn affects her conduct as much as in the case of Frances.

Bobbi's father is mentioned to be "a high-ranking civil servant in the Department of Health" who takes his daughter to "a very expensive restaurant for dinner" where they have "three courses

with wine” (31). Frances also openly remarks that Bobbi’s family is “rich” (95) which makes Bobbi more at home in the bourgeois society the two of them frequent due to Nick and Melissa. Bobbi’s father has no qualm to pay a rent of “six fifty a month” (191) for his daughter and gives “her an allowance every week” (240). Whereas Frances’ father avoids sending his daughter a monthly allowance to cover her bills or even face her about the fact.

Just as Frances’ character is inconspicuously influenced by her social status, naturally, so is Bobbi’s. Frances envies the fact that Bobbi has “a way of belonging everywhere” (95) despite being vocal about her radical opinions and “anti-establishment principles” (31). Frances even remarks that “other wealthy people recognised [Bobbi] as one of their own” (95) regardless of her demeanour and antagonising opinions. Even as Bobbi voices “her radical politics” in their company, others consider them “as a kind of bourgeois self-deprecation” (95) rather than to take an offense to them. Frances describes Bobbi as “a show-off” (7) and while they are in company of Nick and Melissa’s friends, everyone seems “charmed by her” (98), since she makes them laugh. Bobbi’s views are often disregarded as an alluring mannerism rather than something serious, particularly due to her own wealthy background. Generally, Bobbi exhibits more laid-back and cheerful attitude towards life than Frances can afford while facing financial insecurity.

Where Frances struggles with an overdrawn account, relies on borrowing Bobbi’s things and Nick buying her groceries, Bobbi has no need to preoccupy herself with these matters. At one point, the two friends even clash over money in a bitter dispute. When Frances succeeds in having one of her short stories published, Bobbi is absorbed by the way she is depicted in the story rather than to consider the material implications this accomplishment has for her friend. Bobbi, rather hypocritically, berates Frances with statement “I heard you’re getting good money for it” (265), while she herself has no need for funds. To this accusation, Frances refutes “I actually need the money” and rather sharply adds “I realise that’s an alien concept for you” (265). For the first time, Frances thus voices the deep-seated resentment she feels for Bobbi’s financial and social stability.

#### **6.1.4 Social class and condition of Nick and Melissa**

In terms of their wealthy bourgeois background, Nick and Melissa represent a diametric opposite to Frances’ own origins. In consequence, they are equally dissimilar in terms of their personalities and values which is a tension serving as a one of the novel’s principal plot devices. Melissa and Nick’s social, as well as personal values are often in a direct conflict with mainly Frances’, but also Bobbi’s, belief system. However, as it was pointed out in previous chapters, it is Frances who is more vulnerable to the influence of Nick and Melissa’s social class status than Bobbi who herself comes from an affluent background. The relationships and interactions of the four

characters are therefore considerably affected, and to a degree even governed, by the differences in their belief and value systems. In result, each person wields a certain power, stemming from their social class and status, which in turn is once again reflected in their dynamic. Nick and Melissa's power is their sway over Frances and Bobbi who rank underneath them in the social hierarchy. Their dynamic is thus primarily that one of the superior and influential, represented by Nick and Melissa, versus that one of the subordinate and susceptible, represented by Frances and Bobbi.

As it was discussed earlier, Nick and Melissa's wealth and social status lends them a certain sophisticated allure and glamour which captivates Frances and Bobbi. However, the couple's inclusion of Frances and Bobbi into their social circle is hardly an altruistic course of action driven by a sincere interest in the two college students. Over their initial encounter Melissa views Frances and Bobbi mainly as intriguing objects for her new article. Later on, Melissa continues to treat the acquaintance with self-serving interest when she realises that Bobbi is interested in her romantically and Frances is in need of her connections in the literary field. She invites them to spend time with her and her husband's friends, but she continues to treat them with a dose of condescension when she refers to them as "the girls" (105) and looks down upon them. While her haughtiness is partially driven by their youth and apparent naivety, Melissa is equally driven by her class consciousness which ascribes her superiority. She revels in this status and the gratification it brings her which is also the reason why she continues to cultivate their relationship despite seeing Frances and Bobbi as inferior to her.

A rather intriguing display of social hierarchy comes to light when an old upper-class acquaintance of Melissa makes an appearance. Within her own social circle, Melissa's standing is never questioned and she acts with the corresponding self-assurance. It equally gives her the authority to employ this asset in her relationship with Frances and Bobbi. However, Melissa's superior status does not seem as secure in the company of Valerie whom she calls her "mentor" (93). Valerie is in fact a sophisticated upper-class woman in her sixties who comes from "old old money" and previously helped Melissa get her "book published" (93). As Valerie likes "to have people staying in her various properties when she's not around" (93), Melissa, and in turn her friends, are invited to spend some time at her villa in France. Nevertheless, the seeming altruism of this gesture is immediately disproved when Valerie comes to visit them.

In preparation for Valerie's visit, Melissa becomes agitated and irritable as she apparently has a "little hang-up about her" (139). Melissa does everything in her power to ensure Valerie's upper-class taste is pleased. Her efforts fall in vain, when Valerie during a dinner removes "a smudge from her wine glass with a corner of her napkin". In reaction, Melissa's facade falls "like a piece of wire spring" (149). It is rather obvious that there is a significant class disparity between the two, despite

both of them being fairly wealthy and influential on their own. The dynamic between Valerie and Melissa is quite reminiscent of the way Frances and Bobbi behave towards Melissa, especially at the beginning of the novel, when the two are eager to appease Melissa. Moreover, Valerie treats others with an air of superiority, akin to the way Melissa is revealed to often look upon Frances and Bobbi.

In contrast to his wife, Nick appears to be more passive and quiet. Early on, Bobbi points out him being merely Melissa's "trophy husband" (12) despite him being "a successful actor" (19) and thus having his own significant social standing. Moreover, Nick comes from a "wealthy South Dublin family" (43) which places him among the ranks of an established Irish upper-class. While Melissa's own family background is not featured in the book, it can be assumed that Nick's social and class status are equal if not superior to hers.

However, despite Nick's apparent meekness of character, his behaviour is equally self-serving, especially, when it comes to Frances. Nick is well aware of his charms largely stemming from his wealth and career. Frances is therefore flattered when he shows an interest in her and it takes little persuasion from Nick to become his lover. While Nick is open about his antipathy towards his "right-wing" father, who is "a real wealth creator" and "absolutely detests the poor", he also openly remarks that he "would actually approve of" him having "a twenty-one-year-old mistress" (187-188). Nick himself, however, does not seem too disconcerted with the amorality of the situation with which his detested father would be so pleased.

Throughout the story it is either implied or even mentioned that both Melissa and Nick had had extramarital affairs even before they met Frances and Bobbi. From these revelations, it is apparent that Nick and Melissa treat their relationship with the two young students with similar intentions. As pointed out above, the married couple's social status and with it connected influence directly translate into the power they hold over Bobbi and, even more significantly, Frances. However, for Nick and Melissa, the affairs serve as their own diversion and a means of inducing jealousy in one another. Frances herself remarks that Nick is "probably just trying to make [Melissa] jealous" (147) and later he takes "the first opportunity to leave [Frances] as soon as Melissa wanted him again" (287). As neither of the spouses has any intention to break up the marriage, it can also be concluded that the relationship they strike with Frances and Bobbi is, for the most part, only a tool for self-realisation in their unhappy union.

As the two most prominent representatives of their social class within the story, Nick and Melissa are narratively linked to a certain moral decadence and carelessness of character. Within their marriage, but also towards others of lower social status, they act with a lack of moral principles. Their actions are anything but selfless, as they seem to have barely any consideration for the welfare of Frances and Bobbi. Within the story, due to their wealth, Nick and Melissa are untouchable by

material adversity, as is the case of Frances. Unlike her, they thus possess a great deal of freedom which defines their self-serving motivations and actions. When we consider the symbolic level of the narrative structure, Nick and Melissa clearly represent a traditional upper-class antipode to Frances' working class character. The apparent interconnection of their wealth, haughtiness and arrogance matches the archetypal antagonistic power which brings a tension to a novel. Yet, it would be unfair to claim they are only that. Due to the candid depiction of their own wounds, such as Nick's chronic depression and Melissa's insecurity, the two remain realistically human.

## **6.2 Impact of social class and status in *Conversations with Friends***

The proceeding chapter presented the characters of the novel within the context of their social class stemming primarily from their material condition, status in the society and their familial origin. As it was already discussed, these class-affiliated factors play a crucial part in determining the character's personality, personal code of conduct and motivations that drive them. Due to their social class, each character possesses a certain power, usually manifesting as an influence over others, or they conversely lack it. According to the principles upon which Marxist theory is established, such significant determinants, naturally, have an impact on other spheres of the character's daily lives. Therefore, in the following subchapters, there will be examined several selected aspects linked to the effects of social class and status. Namely, there will be discussed the impact on the issues of liminality, mental health, education and job prospects.

### **6.2.1 Liminality as an impact of social class**

*Conversations with Friends* is in many aspects a novel about Bobbi and Frances' search for an identity and a place in the contemporary world. For Frances, this journey is, however, impeded by her undetermined social affiliation. As a college student, Frances finds her social status to be in transition, much like Sally Rooney herself experienced when she underwent her studies in Dublin. Since Frances does not yet have a regular job, her ascribed social status is still merely that of a young student. The inferiority of the status is frequently reminded to her when she is regarded as such by nearly all her acquaintances, usually in a derogatory context. For instance, when Nick chides her saying: "You're a student, don't act like you've got taste" (76). Although, it is meant to be a playful comment, it is emblematic of the way Frances is viewed by others including Nick.

Yet, it is not solely Frances' student status which puts her into an ambiguous position in terms of the social hierarchy. Even more significant than that is her class status. By the virtue of her parentage, Frances is seen someone with a rural working-class origin. However, as a resident of Dublin and a student of the prestigious Trinity College, her class affiliation becomes more complex.

When Frances is admitted into the company of Nick and Melissa's social circle, she is allowed to mingle with other people who belong to high society previously inaccessible to her. The amalgamation of these influences and ascribed statuses thus prevents Frances from assuming one homogenous class identity.

As such, this confliction produces a sense of liminality that oppresses Frances internally. She is well aware of this sentiment within her, although she might not recognise its origin. Frances openly confronts the existence of her turmoil when she bitterly ponders Bobbi's ability to belong everywhere thanks to her bourgeois origin.

I felt out of place in these situations, ignorant and bitter, but also fearful of being discovered as a moderately poor person and a communist. Equally, I struggled to make conversation with people of my own parents' background, afraid that my vowels sounded pretentious or my large flea-market coat made me look rich. (95-96)

From Frances' thoughts, it is thus indisputable that she feels, as if she does not belong to either of the two worlds. This instance also demonstrates how severely she perceives her own social status. It confirms that Frances has a highly developed class consciousness which makes her observe her current status as conflicting with her inborn one.

This state of mind inhibits Frances' self-determination, as she is unable to accept either of the identities. She cannot bring herself to settle for having the same working-class identity as her parents, especially due to her aversion towards her father's state of living. Frances has seen and experienced the detrimental effects of monetary and material insecurity which brings her to desire a better position in life. Yet, due to her resolute moral principles and antipathy towards "rich people" (4), she cannot bring herself to be content within that society either, although she subconsciously yearns for it.

Nevertheless, Frances' moral qualms are not the only obstruction to her social mobility. As pointed out in earlier chapter, Frances is never truly accepted as a member of Nick and Melissa's social circle. While their bourgeois friends treat her with a degree of familiarity, she is still defined by her background in their eyes. Frances realises that she does not "belong in rich people's houses" (60) and that she will never be recognised as one of their own the same way Bobbi is with her affluent familial background. Moreover, as merely Nick's lover Frances cannot truly benefit from his wealth and social standing. If she was his wife or at least an official partner, she could advance her class status through his own. Nevertheless, since their relationship classifies only as an extramarital affair, she is unable to do so. It also yet another element which contributes to her feeling of liminality which

in turn causes her a sense of alienation from the strictly defined positions she could occupy within the traditional social structure.

Due to her liminality, Frances is unable to thrive in neither the bourgeois environment of Nick and Melissa, nor in the rural lower-class environment into which she was born. Her marginality is relayed into her indeterminate social standing and lack of influence in the public sphere of life. The liminal condition, however, does not make Frances a mere powerless casualty of the rigorous class hierarchy. Frances' hunger for acceptance and belonging drives her decisions for the majority of the story. Aside from wounds, liminality thus also bestows a determination on Frances which propels her forward and from which she draws the majority of her power. At the end of the novel, when she comes to realise the pointlessness of her efforts, Frances also reconciles with her liminality. In turn, she relinquishes her endeavour to embed herself into the established social structure and, essentially, positions herself outside of it. Eventually, the liminality thus imparts on Frances a sense of freedom, as she is no longer bound by the expectations that would be imposed upon her by societal expectations if she did occupy a place within the traditional social structure. Frances is thus free to pursue contentment through maintaining an unconventional relationship with both Bobbi and Nick.

### **6.2.2 Mental health impairment as an impact of social class**

Over the course of the novel, the reader observes a gradual deterioration of Frances' mental state. The symptoms of her inner torment are quite subtle at first, but once they are joined by other catalysts, Frances' mental illness begins to unravel at full force. Its primary origin is, without doubt, Frances' self-perception impaired by the parental abuse which has occurred since she was a child. As it was mentioned, her father, Dennis, became an alcoholic which affected the manner in which he treated his family including Frances. However, Frances' mother is equally guilty of a mental abuse towards her daughter, though less intense than that of Dennis. Frances' mother is overly critical of her at times and tends to admonish her daughter for even insignificant reasons. At one point, Frances realises her parents' wrongful conduct when she observes an interaction of an unknown child and her father.

The older girl climbed onto the seat next to me and leaned over her father's shoulder to say something, although he wasn't listening. The girl wriggled around to get his attention, so her light-up sneakers pushed against my handbag and then my arm. When her father finally turned around he said: Rebecca, look what you're doing! You're kicking that woman's arm! I tried to catch his eye and say: it's fine, it's no problem. But he didn't

look at me. To him, my arm was not important. He was only concerned with making his child feel bad, making her feel ashamed. (268)

The scene is a near-perfect image of Frances' relationship with her parents, Frances being the little girl desperately wanting the parents' attention who is acknowledged only to be dismissed and belittled. Although by no means excusable, a partial blame for the parents' behaviour could be attributed to their own difficult living and financial situation which brought down their own spirit and did not allow them the luxury of tenderness towards their child. Such evidence, however, is not present in the text and can be only assumed.

With this piece of information in mind, it comes as no surprise that Frances does not hold herself in high regard. In fact, she openly perceives this notion within her. Her reaction to its existence is a self-destructive tendency to revel in that feeling of inferiority.

After Bobbi left that night I wrote for an hour and a half, poetry in which I figured my own body as an item of garbage, an empty wrapper or a half-eaten and discarded piece of fruit. Putting my self-loathing to work in this way didn't make me feel better as such, but it tired me out. (93-94)

Frances' parent-induced lack of self-worth is by no means ameliorated by the environment in which she finds herself. Since her parents have been prone to treating her with little respect, Frances constantly fluctuates between an internalised sense of loathing and diametrically opposed over-confidence. She invokes her self-assured poise especially in public when facing the bourgeois society. There she is brought down by her sharp class consciousness which reminds her of her liminality and prompts her to perceive, or perhaps believe in, her own inadequacy. Frances recognises that just as her parents regard her with a lack of respect, so do her bourgeois acquaintances, even though they manage to hide it behind pretenses.

When these factors are even further exacerbated by her financial instability and pressure she feels over her clandestine relationship with Nick, Frances eventually resorts to self-harm. In fact, Frances' relationship with Nick itself might be regarded as a form of self-harm. It would be difficult to argue that their dynamic, which will be more closely examined in a later chapter, is a healthy one, since it is strongly affected by the tensions stemming from their contrasting social-class background. Even though, Frances realises the division between their social class and everything that is connected to it, she still tenaciously pursues the relationship regardless of the ache it brings her. The strain is ultimately so unbearable, that Frances begins to experience the urge to "do something dramatic to

stop thinking about how bad” she feels. However, she afterwards recognises that the injury does not make her “feel any better” (287). At that point in the novel, her dismal mental state is in many aspects the result of her liminal social condition and affiliated sense of alienation from everyone, including her family and friends, both old and new.

In fact, after harming herself, Frances has a moment of clarity during which she arrives at a similar conclusion. She says: “I had to look at what had spilled out of me: all my delusional beliefs about my own value and my pretensions to being a kind of person I wasn’t” (287). In the novel, Frances pretends about more than one thing, nevertheless, this comment can be largely understood as the bitterness, she feels over trying to fit in with the elitist bourgeois society of Nick and Melissa’s social circle. She is driven by her desire for their acceptance and affection, but also by more elementary needs of material stability and comfort. Yet, this futile chase ultimately leaves her with a mentally impaired health and feeling only as “an empty cup” (287), haunted by the sensation of estrangement.

The reasons that lead to Frances’ internal sense of liminality appear to be an amalgamation of rather paradoxical factors. On one hand, Frances defines her core identity by the label of a communist and by maintaining a set of anti-bourgeois values. Or rather, she strives to persuade herself that she holds those standards in high regard and to that end, she also oftentimes endorses them in conversations. This seemingly radically political character is, however, undermined by her own actions which go against such set of principles. Frances’ fascination with the bourgeois world and pursue of a wealth, reveal the deep-seated admiration towards it which goes against her rational judgement. The bourgeoisie thus presents a certain paragon of a social class which is a notion fundamentally ingrained in the ideological superstructure and therefore, it has been instilled in Frances’ mind as well. The mental-health impairment stemming from her liminality is thus an indirect product of the class structure that tears Frances’ identity in half and pressures her towards seeking an unattainable ideal.

### **6.2.3 Education and job prospects as an impact of social class**

In correlation to the effect of class, there is one last concept that remains to be examined in connection to Marxist theory. The theoretical part outlined Gramsci’s hegemony which serves the ruling classes as a tool to maintain its dominance and influence over others. *In Conversations with Friends*, the most prominent manifestation of this notion is represented by the influence class has on one’s education, as well as one’s further prospects in life. As it was already discussed in the chapter on classism and regional discrimination in Ireland, the wealth and origin of a person play a significant role in the Irish educational system which favours wealthy students from private schools over the

working-class ones. Therefore, as a person with a lower-class familial background, Frances has the odds set against her when it comes to attending college. She is able to afford the education fees at Trinity only thanks to being on “a financial assistance scheme” (250). Despite her obvious talent in her field of study, Frances would not be able to attend further education and thus cultivate her skills if it were not for the institutional aid. Unlike students from affluent families, Frances’ educational success is entirely dependent on it.

While in college, Frances cannot, or does not choose to, support herself with a full-time job and therefore she is also fully dependent on the financial allowance from her parents, or rather her father who struggles himself. Yet, at the same time, Frances’ success of attending college in Dublin is a source of pride for her father. She recalls the two of them encountering some of his friends in a pub and they would always ask “this is your little prodigy, is it, Dennis?” (50). They would then go on to ask her “crossword clues from the back of the paper, or how to spell very long words” and commenting that “she’ll go off and work for NASA” (50). An experience such as this, clearly points to the rarity of Frances’ attending such a prestigious college in the first place. That is even despite the fact that it ultimately estranges her from her father and her roots.

At one point, Frances has “an internship in a literary agency” where she receives “a stipend” which amounts to almost no money at all. However, the internship is more valuable as a source of job experience and connections. As her fellow intern student comments: “This is how privilege gets perpetuated, Philip told me in the office one day. Rich assholes like us taking unpaid internships and getting jobs off the back of them” (18). To which Frances flippantly retorts: “Speak for yourself, I said. I’m never going to get a job” (18). Such poise is characteristic of Frances and her belief system. However, despite the bold claim, Frances is on the inside well aware that acquiring a job will be eventually inevitable. As she says: “Though I knew that I would eventually have to enter full-time employment, I certainly never fantasised about a radiant future where I was paid to perform an economic role” (23). It is yet another instance of Frances being torn between her anti-institutional principles and her unconscious desire of material stability and even wealth.

In spite of her aversion towards acquiring a traditional job, Frances still longs for a success as a writer. To this end, she continues to engage with Melissa despite realising quite early on in the story that she is not very fond of her. Frances recounts: “I had wanted Melissa to take an interest in me, because we were both writers, but instead she didn’t seem to like me and I wasn’t even sure I liked her” (21). In this sense, Melissa and Frances’ dynamic is very similar to that one of Valerie and Melissa. There is a clear power imbalance between the two sets of characters stemming from their class and influence in the field. Melissa says that she does not think she “could have this next book

published without her” (155) after openly admitting to disliking Valerie. However, just as Melissa is dependent on Valerie for success, so is Frances dependent on Melissa and even Valerie as well.

Frances’ effort of networking comes to fruition when Valerie reaches out to her after Melissa shares Frances’ email address with her. When Frances sends her a short story, Valerie forwards it to an “editor of a literary journal in Dublin” (243). Frances thus eventually succeeds in having a piece of her writing published and acquiring about “eight hundred euro” (244) for it. However, as the story nears the end, Frances’ success, towards which she strove so relentlessly, holds no value. The financial profit is merely a drop in the ocean and it opened no new other doors for her, as she is no longer in Melissa’s good graces. In order to support herself during her studies, Frances therefore needs to take a job “serving coffee in a sandwich shop” (290) which is a draining experience for her. It contributes to a deterioration of her college performance and even further decline in her mental state. Frances’ success in the field thus proves to be fully dependent on her fleeting social connections.

### **6.3 Nick and Frances’ relationship as a manifestation of class struggle**

As it was examined in the two previous chapters, there is a significant class rift between the main characters of *Conversations with Friends*. If we look back at the simplified definition of class struggle introduced in the theoretical part, we clearly notice that according to Marxist theory, such disparity inevitably leads to a class conflict denominated as so called ‘class struggle.’ In the novel, the differences in the characters’ living conditions and life priorities do not only affect their individual actions, but they have an equally significant impact on their interrelationships as well. As such, the principal manifestation of class struggle is through the characters’ relationships and the power dynamics within them. The following chapter will thus examine the relationship of Nick and Frances in terms of the power distribution. Their relationship is the story’s most prominent representative of a dynamic defined by the social-class factor which, within the framework of Marxist literary theory, represents a key determinant in one’s life, as it was stated earlier in the theoretical part.

The disparity in power distribution in Nick and Frances’ relationship has multiple causes which together result in a very complex dynamic. Therefore, the characters’ dissimilar class origin cannot be seen as the single source of tension in the structure of the relationship. Both gender and age are just as important agents which need to be considered in order to envisage the full picture. Unlike Frances, Nick has multiple assets upon which he can draw for power, including his moderately successful career of an actor, good social standing as well as affluence. While Frances as a narrator is quite forgiving of his role in their affair, it is more than clear that Nick does use his allure to exercise influence over her.

It is Nick's interest in Frances that flatters her and brings her to notice him as more than just Melissa's "trophy husband" (12). However, as it was disclosed in an earlier chapter, his interest is ultimately quite self-serving. Due to Nick's discontent in his marriage to Melissa, his affair with Frances becomes a diversion to him. It even improves his mental well-being to such a degree that Melissa herself later remarks that Frances is "a function of the betterness" (236) her husband has been experiencing due to the affair. Moreover, even though Melissa refers to Nick as "pathologically submissive" (235), he is the one who holds a great deal of the power in his and Frances' relationship. Nick is to the one who determines the course of their affair. He decides whether their relationship is to be kept as a secret, on which conditions they meet and ultimately when it should end.

By the end of the novel, Frances realises that Nick had not been sincere with her when she reflects on their relationship: "He knew that I loved him, that he was exploiting my tender feelings for him, and he didn't care" (218). From a certain point of view, their dynamic could be seen as a symbol for the hackneyed exploitation of the underprivileged working class by the oppressive upper class. However, Nick and Frances' relationship is nowhere near as straightforward and clichéd. In spite of her self-conviction, Frances does hold some power in their relationship. It is a power that comes above all from her agency. In spite of being largely driven by the motivations and traits which were imparted on her by her social background and situation, Frances makes her own decision to enter into the affair with Nick.

Unlike from her relationship with Melissa, who holds an influence in the field of her interest, Frances has realistically little to gain from her affair with Nick. Despite seeing herself as powerless due to her social status and lack of resources, Frances still very much desires her situation to change for the better. Contrary to her belief system, she thus finds herself being "infatuated" with the Nick and Melissa's home due to it being "immaculate" and equipped with "expensive utensils" (76). She even goes as far as to think: "For a few seconds I imagined that this was my house, that I had grown up here, and the things in it belonged to me" (55). Already quite early on, Frances' feelings for Nick are interwoven with her material longing brought about by her own meager life situation and background. At times, Frances thus appears to be more drawn to Nick's social standing and wealth rather than to him as a person. Whether Frances realises it or not, Nick becomes for her the symbol of bourgeois life she secretly covets.

Near the end of the story, Frances comes to the realisation that her actions were, to a great extent, motivated by her jealousy of Melissa and her life in particular, when she says: "I wanted it to be my house. I wanted your whole life. Maybe I did shitty things to try and get it, but I'm poor and you're rich. I wasn't trying to trash your life, I was trying to steal it" (297). In her bitterness over the turn of events, Frances sees herself as a powerless victim of the wealth inequality. While the class

disparity certainly brought Frances closer to making the decision of engaging in the affair with Nick, the decision to do so was, ultimately, her own. Even though she oftentimes claimed to not expect Nick to leave Melissa, she still very much longed to officially become his partner. Frances wanted to acquire Melissa's lifestyle and social standing for herself, thus ultimately using Nick in a similarly selfish manner in which he used her. The entirety of her efforts is thus a manifestation of Frances' struggle to reach the empty ideal of bourgeois life and status which is imposed upon her by the societal standards of the ideological superstructure.

## **7. *Normal People***

*Normal People* was published as Sally Rooney's second book in 2018, not long after her literary debut. As such, the two novels include a number of similarities and parallels, which will be examined later in more detail. *Normal People* novel is once again set in Ireland between the years 2011 and 2015 in the aftermath of financial crisis. Over this period of time, the reader follows another coming-of-age story of two young protagonists Connell and Marianne. Through a dual perspective narration, Connell and Marianne convey the account of their complicated relations, individual search for identity and self-determination. The characters first meet at secondary school where their relationship commences along with its complex dynamic. As the story continues, Connell and Marianne begin to attend Trinity college in Dublin, where they find their roles and places reversed as opposed to their small home town. Over the years, they both struggle due to their social standing and background, in one way or another, but it is their mutual friendship and love that allows them to persevere in spite of their hardship and trauma.

### **7.1 Social class and condition in *Normal People***

Similarly to Rooney's debut novel, *Normal People* is also heavily focused on painting a complex portrait of the two protagonists. As such, it is preoccupied with capturing their character development over the years, their psyche and inner struggle. Upon closer inspection of both Marianne and Connell, it is easily discernible that much of their fundamental character traits and in turn choices have an origin in their background, just as it was the case of Frances in *Conversations with Friends*. Akin to the previous section, in order to examine and understand the personalities of the novel's protagonists, we shall turn to the principles of the Marxist theory. To this end, there ought to be examined Marianne and Connell's social class, standing and familial background which represent the key formative factors of one's character according to Marxist literary theory. The following two subchapters will thus inquire into the characters' class and status in, as to uncover how their personality and motivations are defined by it.

#### **7.1.1 Social class and condition of Marianne and her family**

Social class represents one of chief areas of interest to Marxist literary criticism, as upon examining it, we are allowed to look underneath the surface of the character. Social class is an indicator affiliated with spectrum of factors, such as, one's social standing, value system and power they possess within the social structure. Marianne comes from an affluent family with a significant renown since her mother is a solicitor and so was her late father. However, despite the family's wealth, they do not possess a particularly high social standing among the residents of Carricklea. Especially

Marianne's mother Denise is described as "a bit odd" (260), which is revealed to be an understatement. It conceals the fact that Denise is disliked due to behaving in a haughty manner, as it is illustrated by a scene in which she ignores Lorraine, Connell's mother, when she politely greets her in public. Denise just walks by "not speaking, eyes ahead" (260). In another instance, Marianne also admits to her mother being avaricious despite her wealth, as she does not pay "Lorraine very well" (173). As she is not a prominent character in the story, Denise is depicted rather flatly as a stereotypically snobby representative of the bourgeoisie who considers herself socially superior to the other members of the community.

Denise's arrogance and coldness of character are in many ways shared by her son Alan and others see them in her daughter Marianne as well. Marianne therefore possesses a status of an outcast among her Carricklea peers. They know she lives in "the white mansion with the driveway" (2), but despite her family's wealth, she "is considered an object of disgust" (3). Nevertheless, as low as her social standing is, Marianne's classmates are equally captivated by her. due to the very same reasons. She is a target of gossips and rumours revolving mainly around her nonconforming behaviour. When given the opportunity, one of her classmates immediately begins to question Connell for any information about her and her lifestyle in order to affirm his stereotypical assumptions. He is curious to know what the family's mansion is like, and whether Marianne has "a little bell she would ring to get [Lorraine's] attention" (23). Although her peers harbour a distaste towards her family's wealth and her manners, they are equally consumed by their curiosity and possibly even jealousy of Marianne's station. Little do they know that there is in fact nothing to be desired about the life with her abusive brother and mother.

Marianne's social standing drastically changes when she moves to Dublin in order to attend further education. In the environment of the prestigious Trinity College, Marianne's class affiliation and family background is viewed through a completely different lens. Since Marianne belongs to the upper-class majority of students there, she begins to feel more at ease interacting with people of similar class origin. Connell once tells her: "...you're from a rich family, that's why people like you" (88-89), while he means it as a teasing comment, it is an accurate observation. The other college students easily identify Marianne as one of them. They thus treat her based on her ascribed class status with respect and amiability. In result of this change, Marianne comes out of her shell and she is appreciated for the same personal traits that made her odd in her rural hometown. In fact, conversely to her previous status, she becomes the object of desire for many men. Connell bitterly notes that: "Marianne has a lot of other romantic options, as everyone knows" (98). They are "politics students" and "committee members of college clubs" (98) who are alike her in their prestige of social status and familial background.

Yet, despite its beneficial influence on Marianne's social status, the college environment is almost equally detrimental to her welfare. Amidst college parties of her new acquaintances, Marianne is subjected to their decadent lifestyle. Due to the damage done upon her self-esteem by her cold and abusive family, Marianne is driven by the desire to be worthy of affection at any cost. Therefore, when she is subjected to peer pressure, she easily succumbs to excessive drinking and experimenting with drugs which seem to be a commonplace for the other affluent students. Her acceptance into the upper-class college society, however, turns out to be a facade when she later breaks free from her damaging behaviour patterns. By the end of the story, Marianne is once again nearly friendless. Only few of them remain by her side, but they do it regardless of her lost social status and wealth, as she had also separated from her family.

### **7.1.2 Social class and condition of Connell and his mother**

In many aspects, Connell's working-class familial background represents the polar opposite to Marianne's bourgeois one. In fact, Connell's family is "notorious" (32) in Carricklea and they hold no prominent social standing. One of his uncles "was in prison once" and the other one "got into a motorcycle crash (...) and almost died" (32). Lastly, there is also Lorraine, Connell's mother, who had to leave school when she became pregnant at the age of seventeen and raised Connell as a single mother. Due to her lack of formal education, Lorraine has several jobs as a cleaner, including one in Marianne's house. Despite her lack of resources and inability to later financially support Connell at college, Lorraine is a nurturing mother to her son who often acts as his moral compass. Lorraine represents a direct opposite to the cold and materialist character of Denise and her abusive treatment of Marianne.

Despite his family's inferior social standing, Connell enjoys a great deal of popularity among his Carricklea peers and he is even considered to be "quite a catch" (32). He is appreciated for being "studious", "good-looking", not getting into fights and playing "centre forward in football" (32). Even though his popularity is quite secure at this point, Connell is still consumed by his need for public esteem, especially that one of his friends. His insecurity is brought about by his inner self being at odds with his public persona. When interacting with Marianne in private, Connell is revealed to have been rather timid, introspective person with a literary inclination, all of which would surely be mocked by his peers, or at least he believes so. Connell is therefore highly protective of his superior social standing to the point that only being seen interacting with Marianne, the outcast, would be an inadmissible threat. His obsession brings him to invite another socially-acceptable classmate to the Debs, a prom ball, instead of Marianne with whom he is in a relationship at that point. Soon after that, the betrayal of his decision breaks them up for the first time.

When Connell begins attending Trinity college in Dublin, he finds his new social status to be nothing alike to that in Carricklea. His and Marianne's position become virtually reversed by the nature of the elitist environment. Just as Marianne is perceived in terms of her class origin, so is Connell who therefore becomes the misfit there. His new bourgeois peers see him as a "milk-drinking culchie" (149) and comment at his thick "Sligo accent" (165). Even when he is somewhat admitted into their society, though only by the grace of his connection to Marianne, he is still not truly accepted as one of them. On the outside, his new peers pretend to be open-minded, but they still judge him behind his back. They scoff at the fact that he is "from a fairly working-class background" and that he wears "just tracksuits most of the time" (85) rather than to acknowledge his intelligence and exceptional academic results.

Connell's internal drive of needing to be socially accepted is the reason why he cannot be even seen interacting with Marianne at secondary school. Yet, when he moves to Dublin, his connection to Marianne becomes of use to him, since he realises that his social status is relative to the environment which he occupies. His class differences are at full display there and he is fully conscious of the fact.

Now he has a sense of invisibility, nothingness, with no reputation to recommend him to anyone. Though his physical appearance has not changed, he feels objectively worse-looking than he used to be. He has become self-conscious about his clothes. All the guys in his class wear the same waxed hunting jackets and plum-coloured chinos, not that Connell has a problem with people dressing how they want, but he would feel like a complete prick wearing that stuff. At the same time, it forces him to acknowledge that his own clothes are cheap and unfashionable. (70)

Connell's rather pathological self-consciousness and need for the esteem of others is only exacerbated by his attending a college full of people above his class, as there is little he can do to become socially acceptable in their eyes. Connell thus becomes indirectly dependent on Marianne's social status and her prestige. Thanks to her, he gains, at least for some time, "the status of rich-adjacent" (99) which is a situation completely antithetical to what would happen in Carricklea if he was associated with her.

## **7.2 Impact of social class and status in *Normal People***

As the previous chapter disclosed, the two protagonists, Marianne and Connell, come from two utterly different backgrounds in terms of their social class. They both also experience different

social standings and degrees of prestige that are ascribed to them mainly by their peers, but also by society at large. As the theoretical part has discussed, Marxist literary theory looks upon all of these aspects as playing prominent roles in all spheres of Marianne and Connell's lives. However, due to their diametrical personal differences in their own social-class background, Marianne and Connell are each affected by those factors in a distinct manner. Since the novel is largely focused on their education and with it connected student's life, many of the effects are linked to this reality. Due to its setting and themes, *Normal People* presents a similar set of issues to the one featured in *Conversations with Friends*. Therefore, akin to the chapter 6.2, the three following sub-chapters will examine the sense of estrangement, impairment of mental health, as well as education and further job prospects. According to the principles of Marxist literary criticism, they will be treated as heavily determined or even produced by the protagonists' own social class.

### **7.2.1 Liminality and estrangement as an impact of social class**

Neither of the protagonists is a stranger to being liminal among their peers, as they are both labeled to be outsiders and misfits at some point in the story. Yet, each of them is affected by that experience differently, as it happens due to unlike reasons. In fact, the novel's principal motif is Connell and Marianne's pursuit of normalcy as the title, *Normal People*, suggests. In Marianne's case, the social class presents more of a circumstantial cause for her liminality. It is Connell whose liminality may be more directly linked to his social class status and affiliated factors and who perceives the issue more deeply than Marianne.

#### **7.2.1.1 Marianne's liminality**

At the beginning of the story, Marianne's inferior social standing is determined by two major factors. The external one is her family's status in the Carricklea community as well as their wealth which make the other students regard her with a resentment and envy. The second factor is her own internalised feeling of superiority due to which she distances herself from others even more. She believes school to be "an oppressive environment" (12) in which she has nothing to learn unlike her classmates who are 'ignorant' to this reality. Yet, despite this sentiment, she simultaneously perceives her own position as inferior due to her ostracism.

Marianne sometimes sees herself at the very bottom of the ladder, but other times she pictures herself off the ladder completely, not affected by its mechanics, since she does not actually desire popularity or do anything to make it belong to her. From her vantage

point it is not obvious what rewards the ladder provides, even to those who really are at the top. (29)

Marianne is quite perceptive of her standing in the social hierarchy and she harbours no illusions about it. Simultaneously, as the featured quote suggests, Marianne is, however, compelled to be seen as removed from the social hierarchy altogether which stems from her self-perceived uniqueness and abnormality.

The sentiment of a certain otherness accompanies Marianne for the entirety of the novel. Even when her station changes in college and she is finally admitted onto the “ladder” (29), her actions never become strictly fuelled by the desire to climb higher in the social hierarchy. Nevertheless, Marianne is desperately motivated to maintain her social standing due to her desire to be accepted and cherished, which does drive her to some morally questionable actions. In the end, Marianne, however, proves to be less affected by her social-class status than Connell happens to be. Later on, she loses her popularity and majority of her upper-class acquaintances after breaking up with one of them brings her a “reputational damage” (230). Although the circumstance of it causes her to experience a temporary feeling of “shame” (230), she overcomes it rather promptly. Marianne decides that: “Whether she was respected or despised, it didn’t make much difference in the end” (192). All of Marianne’s relationships are depicted as closely tied and even defined by social class, although Marianne appears to be neglectful of it herself, often to her detriment. It illustrates that even nowadays, at least in the world as Sally Rooney views it, there prevails a certain fixation on one’s socio-economic status which is still present in romantic relationships across all age groups.

Marianne proves to be rather resilient to her loss of popularity and it even brings her a much-needed moment of clarity. She comes to the realisation that if people were more accepting of her in secondary school, she would have acted “just as badly as anyone else” (195). That is to say, she too would be tempted to climb the social ladder by the means of “exchanges of social capital” (195) in order to be socially accepted. Nevertheless, her desire for social acclaim is not class-induced, but rather brought about by her deficit in self-esteem due to her mental problems and experienced abuse. Had Marianne been in the same position as Connell, in terms of social class, she might have exhibited a different pattern of behaviour driven by the same impulses. However, since she stands so high in the class structure, she experiences no need to appeal to others and better herself socially.

#### **7.2.1.2 Connell’s liminality and estrangement**

Connell is more preoccupied with his working-class status than Marianne is with her bourgeois one. In order to examine the origin of this tendency and its impact, Marxist literary theory

would have us turn attention to Connell's personality and motivations are as strongly shaped by his social-class status, as Marianne's ones are, if not more. Connell begins to take a closer notice of his social class when he starts attending Trinity. While he too has a desire to be socially accepted, he is realistically unable to ever achieve it in the environment where he is surrounded by students who believe themselves to be above him. Even when Connell is endorsed by Marianne, he continues to be the underprivileged outsider in the company of other wealthy students judged based on his "socio-economic status" (86). Although, Connell and Marianne both come from the same place, only Connell is regarded in terms of his rural background due to his lack of familial wealth and status.

In result, Connell's self-consciousness gradually intensifies, as he struggles to accept his newly-acquired identity and come to terms with the elitist environment. He is disdained by the fact that "everyone [in Trinity] just goes around comparing how much money their parents make" (217). Nevertheless, it is not only his lack of finances that sets him aside, but also the unfamiliar manner of conduct brought about by bourgeois-induced confidence his peers possess.

All Connell's classmates have identical accents and carry the same size MacBook under their arms. In seminars they express their opinions passionately and conduct impromptu debates. [...] Connell initially felt a sense of crushing inferiority to his fellow students, as if he had upgraded himself accidentally to an intellectual level far above his own, where he had to strain to make sense of the most basic premises. [...]. He understands now that his classmates are not like him. It's easy for them to have opinions, and to express them with confidence. They don't worry about appearing ignorant or conceited. (67-68)

As the quote reveals, Connell is acutely aware of the liminality that is attached to his position of a working-class Trinity student. At one point, he even experiences feeling "profoundly and almost unendurably alienated from his own body" (204) when he is surrounded by other students above his status whose conversation he is unable to join.

Due to his choice of further education, Connell not only turns into an outsider in his new student life, but he becomes detached from his past self. Even though he sometime experienced a "feeling of isolation" (216) in secondary school, he was always surrounded by peers who respected him, albeit due to superficial reasons. In college, he senses that "people don't like [him] that much" (216). Yet, the life he could have had if he stayed in Carricklea is gone by that point. Although, Connell hates the experience of a prestigious college, he understands that he "can never go back there again" (217), which only deepens his anguish.

By the end of the novel, Connell does achieve the validation he had so desperately craved ever since secondary school despite the fact that his liminality remains. He never succeeds in embedding himself into the bourgeois society and due to his education, his inborn working-class status no longer stands either. His romantic relationship with Helen, which is a futile attempt to unite his old and new identity, ultimately fails, since he cannot be the true liminal self with her, just as he can be with Marianne. Only when Connell accepts his identity, he is able to be reunited in a relationship with Marianne which is where he feels the most at home, regardless of their differences. Although he never truly achieves the public acclaim and acceptance of the majority of his peers, Connell's desire for validation bears fruit in the academic sphere. First, he gains a prestigious scholarship and later, he is later even offered place in a creative writing programme in New York. Finally, he is rewarded for the traits which his peers overlooked in secondary school and undermined at college.

### **7.2.2 Mental health impairment as an impact of social condition**

Connell and Marianne both experience severe mental-health problems as a consequence of their imbalanced inner self and impaired self-perception. For Marianne, her self-destructive tendencies are fuelled by her lack of self-worth imparted upon her by her family's abuse. The factor of social class has a little effect on her, as she is rather disinterested in that aspect of her popularity, favouring simply just the acceptance of others. As someone who has sufficient financial resources and later also substantial social standing at her disposal, Marianne has the privilege of not being absorbed with any hardship connected to one's social condition. Though her liminality causes her a significant torment and feeling of isolation, her social condition is merely an accompanying circumstance. That is to say, it had presumably contributed to the mindset of her materialistic and arrogant family who then chose her as a target to their abusive behaviour.

On the symbolic level, Marianne is thus, paradoxically, a victim of the same violent tendencies which upper-classes usually exhibit towards the subordinate groups of the society. She is broken and forced into submission, much in the same manner through which dominant classes maintain their privilege and power over others. It could be speculated, whether this occurrence is Rooney's way of implying the vulture-like nature of the upper-class mindset which makes it turn even against their own. Conversely, Connell's relationship with his mother is an example of a nurturing bond, often stereotypically ascribed to the morally superior working class. The support of his mother, is also the reason, why Connell manages to retain a relative mental stability for much longer than Marianne does.

Still, unlike Marianne, Connell does need to preoccupy himself with his material situation since he is not financially secure and he cannot rely on his mother's aid. His insecurity in this area only adds to the pressure he is under, due to his sense of estrangement from others. As he is unable to reconcile his two selves, past and present, and find the normalcy he so desperately seeks, Connell's anxiety gradually increases.

His anxiety, which was previously chronic and low-level, serving as a kind of all-purpose inhibiting impulse, has become severe. His hands start tingling when he has to perform minor interactions like ordering coffee or answering a question in class. Once or twice he's had major panic attacks: hyperventilation, chest pain, pins and needles all over his body. A feeling of dissociation from his senses, an inability to think straight or interpret what he sees and hears. (206)

The quote illustrates Connell's mental state when he is at his worst. The tipping point becomes a suicide of his former secondary-school classmate due to which he succumbs to a severe depression. The aforementioned circumstances of his liminal state, only exacerbate the guilt he feels over his friend's death. Connell blames himself for not reaching out to him in order to help, since he essentially separated himself from his old mundane life in Carricklea in favour of pursuing the pretentious lifestyle of a Trinity student.

Connell did so in favour of constructing a new more prestigious identity for himself which he ultimately failed to integrate into his personality. In his isolated state of someone who does not believe to belong at Trinity, Connell has nearly nobody to whom he could turn for aid with his mental health. When he is finally pushed to seek a professional help, he feels reservations about the sincerity of the situation. He notes his doubts when he says that the doctor is only "assigned by the university to listen to his problems for money" (206). Yet, conflictingly, only reason why he is able to attend the counseling is because the school pays for it, since he would not be able to afford it himself.

### **7.2.3 Education and job prospects as an impact of social class**

Although not disclosed directly in the text, it can be assumed that Marianne's choice of college is largely motivated by the school's prestige and her ambition. Since she comes from an affluent background, she has no need to consider the practical aspect of her decision as Connell does. His first choice is to study "Law in Galway", even though "he has no interest in Law" (20). He sees it as a prudent option that would ensure his financial stability in his further life. Therefore, when Marianne suggests that he "should study English" (20), a subject he does enjoy, Connell is apprehensive to the

idea. He has doubts about the practical applicability of such a degree, saying he is “not sure about the job prospects” (20). Upon hearing it, Marianne is, however, quite dismissive to his reservations, as she is unable to empathise with his situation.

Their contrasting attitudes to the institution of Trinity College can be seen echoing throughout the story. As the previous chapters have already mentioned, Connell is more acutely aware of his working-class background when he is interacting with the other students. The impact is ultimately detrimental to his mental health and his perception of self, while Marianne relatively prospers under the same circumstances. However, their dissimilarities go even further than that, especially, when faced with the prospect of acquiring a prestigious scholarship.

Similarly to the instance when they were discussing their choice of further education, Marianne and Connell take two antipodal positions on the significance of the scholarship that offers “five years of paid tuition, free accommodation on campus, and meals in the Dining Hall every evening with the other scholars” (138). For Marianne, this reality holds no true value. Since she has no need to “pay her own rent or tuition and has no real concept of how much these things cost”, she desires the scholarship only for its symbolic value. She labels it as only “a matter of reputation” and adds that she “would like her superior intellect to be affirmed in public by the transfer of large sums of money” (138). The success represents for her a certain prestige and gratification of her need for social acclaim.

Connell, due to his humble material situation, regards the scholarship in a completely different light. While he has a comparable ambitious streak, the scholarship is primarily a matter of material necessity for him. Actually acquiring it astounds him, as it is almost surreal to see it become a reality. Connell realises the disparity in his and Marianne’s attitude towards this particular success. He expresses the value the scholarship holds for him in the following quote:

For him the scholarship is a gigantic material fact, like a vast cruise ship that has sailed into view out of nowhere, and suddenly he can do a postgraduate programme for free if he wants to, and live in Dublin for free, and never think about rent again until he finishes college. (159)

With his financial insecurity gone, Connell experiences a temporary liberation which lifts some weight off his chest. For the first time in his life, he is able to spend his money on unessential expenses “disseminating currency with the carefree attitude of a rich person” (159). Nevertheless, the scholarship ultimately only strengthens his sense of guilt over his upward social-mobility and contributes to his alienation from his past self.

### 7.3 Marianne and Connell's relationship as a manifestation of class struggle

The preceding chapters examined the individual differences between the two protagonists of *Normal People* in terms of their class origin and social standing. As it was disclosed, their class-induced differences notably affect their perspective on life at large. However, their attitude towards each other is impacted by the class disparity just as significantly, despite the fact that they rarely acknowledge it openly. As such, their social disparity is a source of significant narrative tension in the story. Since the tension is one that stems from Marianne and Connell's social class, we can once again invoke the theoretical part and identify as a manifestation of class struggle.

While Marianne and Connell's relationship is without doubt shaped by more factors than just one, their differences in social standing arguably represent the most influential one. It is the principal reason why they separate twice and continue to orbit around each other without daring to become a couple again. Even though Marianne is by no means as materialistic and snobbish as her family, her priorities lie elsewhere than Connell's do. Connell is also more conscious, perhaps even overly so, of their social-status differences which puts a strain on their relationship and his ability to communicate with Marianne openly about it from the very beginning.

In the first part of the novel, Marianne and Connell's relationship is almost exclusively governed by Connell's choices and anxieties. As Marianne's social standing is inferior to that of Connell's, he is unwilling to be publicly associated with her in any manner. In school he ignores her completely and refuses to "even look at her" (17). He rather dramatically surmises that if their peers found out about their romantic relationship "his life would be over" (27). Marianne is compliant with this state of things, as she has little choice in the matter. Since she holds no social power, the only influence she can exercise over Connell is her personal charisma which she unknowingly uses to encourage Connell to apply to Trinity.

Yet, as Marianne is so used to being powerless, she does not even consider using Connell to elevate her social standing at that point in the story. Marianne does desperately want to be accepted by their peers, even if she is trying to convince herself of the opposite. When their classmates begin to joke about their possible attachment, Connell chooses to ask someone else as a date to a public event and protect his public standing at the expense of Marianne's feelings. When their relationship is broken off for the first time because of this, Marianne comes to a conclusion that by being with Connell, she had "deluded herself" into assuming she was "socially acceptable" (63). Although it would paradoxically mean to be associated with someone of a lower class than hers. Connell is then plagued by remorse about his self-serving decision to protect his public face.

When they meet again in college, they find their roles to be reversed. While Marianne is the coveted centre of attention, Connell has become the outcast in the incommensurable environment. For nearly the rest of the story, their dynamic is then defined through this perspective. As it was previously stated, Connell is very acutely aware of the class disparity between him and the majority of the other Trinity students. In case of Marianne, his self-doubt is even further exacerbated by his caring for her. In fact, Connell is preoccupied with their class-induced differences more than Marianne who pays little attention to such matters. Connell has a tendency to project his insecurities and class assumptions onto his and Marianne's relationship which puts a detrimental strain on it.

Finances and circulation of money between them and their families are major taboo topics in their relationship. Whereas Connell is weighted down by it immensely, Marianne is barely aware of its existence.

They had never talked, for example, about the fact that her mother paid his mother money to scrub their floors and hang their laundry, or about the fact that this money circulated indirectly to Connell, who spent it, as often as not, on Marianne. He hated having to think about things like that. He knew Marianne never thought that way. She bought him things all the time, dinner, theatre tickets, things she would pay for and then instantly, permanently, forget about. (122)

In this context, Marianne's behavior is not a matter of kindness but rather her disregard of material aspects of life as such. As a member of the bourgeoisie, who experiences no financial need, she is blind to Connell's difficulties and in turn, to his affiliated insecurities. When Connell at one point notes that the two of them are "from very different backgrounds, class-wise", Marianne instantly retorts that she does not "think about it much" (173) and promptly realises the ignorance of her statement. Their opposing material situation and inability to view the world through each other's mindset demonstrate the irreconcilability of the two social classes Connell and Marianne represent. It is thus a direct manifestation of the cause behind the class struggle which is brought about by class inequality, as the theoretical part had previously discussed.

A major rift occurs when Connell has no money to pay his rent and stay in Dublin over one summer. He has no other choice but seek Marianne's help or return home for the summer. Nevertheless, as he is reluctant to debase himself by asking Marianne to let him stay in her apartment, even if it is only for one summer, since it feels "too much like asking her for money" (122). Due to Connell's inability to communicate and Marianne's lack of self-esteem, their conversation goes astray. In result, it ends their romantic relationship and separates them for a long time. Even if it

allows Connell to keep his dignity, his mind decides to jump to a conclusion that justifies his misstep and alleviates his guilt.

Marianne had just wanted to see someone else all along, he thought. She was probably glad he'd had to leave Dublin because he was broke. She wanted a boyfriend whose family could take her on skiing holidays. (124-125)

Connell thus essentially avoids responsibility by putting the blame on Marianne. He decides to stereotype her based on her social class and without any proof, instead of acknowledging his part in the misunderstanding.

The eventual restoration of their relationship is possible only at the end of the novel when Connell has slowly come to terms with his liminal position in society and has begun to confront his insecurities. Marianne's position and mindset is equally changed when she severs her ties to her family and the majority of elitist acquaintances. Only at that point, they both finally stand as socially equal and they are thus able to interact without class-induced constraints for the first time. That is to say, Connell is no longer bound by his class preconceptions and assumptions, while Marianne is at last able to comprehend his position in life and priorities. Their symbolic rejection of traditional class structure allows both of them to experience true contentment in life, for the first time. Reconciled and unburdened by social class preconceptions, Connell and Marianne are able to find solace in one another, regardless of what awaits them next.

## 8. *Conversations with Friends and Normal People*

*Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* are in many ways alike, as they both share a similar underlying structure of searching for identity in an uprooted world with practically impenetrable social structure. Due to the number of shared features, such as, socially imbalanced relationships or struggle with liminality, the two books feature many parallels, as well as differences. *Conversations with Friends*, however, presents a narrower point of view than *Normal People*, as it is centered around Frances, a single working-class protagonist, through whose eyes the whole story unfolds. While the other characters in the story certainly play crucial roles, there is, in truth, presented only Frances' side of the story, biased by her own class background and preconceptions. This fact then causes them to sometimes appear as rather archetypal representatives of their class rather than individuals with their own motivations and flaws. Due to this reason, *Normal People* comes across as a more balanced entity. Throughout the story the narration pans between the two antipodal protagonists and therefore the reader has the ability to perceive them and their journey relatively without a bias.

The last section will look upon the two novels, *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, in relation to one another as to determine the similarities and differences within their framework. As the theoretical part has pointed out, social class and class struggle are essential factors of a Marxist analysis. These factors were already examined in the two previous sections which has provided us with a closer understanding of the characters, their motivations and relationships in terms of class. Due to these observations, we are thus enabled to now look upon the novels within a broader context of Marxist literary theory as it was outlined in the theoretical part. That includes the application of Marxist theory as a critique of capitalism, deliberation of Marxism's ethical background and valuation of freedom, as well as the use of Marxist theory as an analysis of the status quo present in the contemporary society.

Since the issues of relationships and identity stand at the forefront of both novels, this section will thus explore the parallels and differences between the two pivotal sets of characters in relation to the aforementioned principles Marxist literary criticism and concepts of Marxist theory as such. Firstly, there will be examined their relationships as governed by the aggressively individualistic norms promulgated by the capitalist system of contemporary age. Secondly, there will be analysed the character development of the protagonists and the conclusion to their journey as depicted in the novels. The third and last subchapter of this section will then attempt to surmise the way in which the characters challenge the status quo or aid in maintaining it.

## 8.1 Relationships and power dynamics governed by capitalist norms

In an interview for Toronto Public Library, Sally Rooney gave background to one of the defining elements implemented in the structure of her novels. She pointed out the recently-altered way of things in Ireland which is these days missing the moral value system once provided by the Catholic church. As it has “deteriorated hugely in its power over Irish society” (Appel Salon), it no longer holds its position in the ideological superstructure it once had. Instead, it has been replaced by “individualistic capitalist and social framework”, which, however, does not provide any comparable “moral ethos” (Appel Salon). Therefore, in the absence of the rigorous Christian moral code of conduct, Rooney’s characters are exposed to the principles propagated by the capitalist system revolving around zealous pursuit of self-interest. Naturally, this principle is then reflected not only in their personal choices, but in their interpersonal relations. The characters’ relationships thus unintentionally assume a certain transactional nature which is emblematic of the capitalist system and its philosophical foundation. Over the course of both novels, its protagonists strive to cope with this reality and seek a way in which they can either counteract it, or at least come to terms with it.

As the preceding chapters have already illustrated, the romantic relationships in both novels are oftentimes governed by self-interest of the parties involved in them. While Frances and Bobbi initially hope to use Melissa and Nick for their own reputation, Nick and Melissa use them back as a diversion from their dysfunctional marriage. Nick then later maintains an affair with Frances exploiting her to soothe his mental state and he gets “so much better” (236) in result, according to Melissa. Frances similarly uses Nick, possibly, in covert hopes of bettering her station in life, but mainly due to the fact that he lets her feel powerful and socially grounded. In a similar manner, Connell uses Marianne to elevate his status in college to “rich-adjacent” (99), even though he earlier refused to be even seen with Marianne to protect his reputation. Marianne in turn draws on her relationship with Connell for a sense of security and self-worth which she is unable to find anywhere else.

In public, all of the characters are also engaged in a complex set of interactions based on the exchange of “social capital”, as Rooney puts it (Appel Salon). Consciously or not, they engage in the existing social hierarchy by the means of currency such as reputation, acclaim or admiration of others. By being associated with Nick and Melissa, Frances and Bobbi strive to harness this form of capital, just as Connell does when he is benefiting from Marianne’s social standing. Conversely, Nick and Connell deny bestowing this currency on Frances and Marianne by keeping their relationships as only clandestine affairs. Marianne herself, also avoids losing her social capital by not defending Connell when her college friends comment on his mediocrity. It would thus seem that all of the characters treat their attachments in a rather selfish manner. Above all else, their mutual dynamic of exploiting

one another appears to be driven by their individual desires of gain, akin to the foundation of the capitalist system itself.

Such finding, might lead us to pose the question whether all love under capitalism, as depicted by Rooney, is therefore a selfish form of exploitation. In *Conversations with Friends*, Bobbi and Frances are engaged in a philosophical discussion on the nature of love. Bobbi poses the thought that love is “antithetical to capitalism, in that it challenges the axiom of selfishness” and “yet also it’s subservient and facilitatory” (180) to it. Frances then supplies her argument by asserting the opinion that “capitalism harnesses ‘love ’for profit” (180). Despite the nearly absurd oversimplification of the exchange, Frances and Bobbi essentially put forward the uncertainty which haunts the characters of both novels. It is a dilemma caused by the nature of the world that surrounds them, namely its duality of selfishness and selflessness, which is in the novels manifested through relationships and love in particular.

Upon applying this context to the two novels, the reader might thus pose the question how does love under capitalism, despite it supposedly being selfless in its core, manifest as more than a mere advancement of one’s prospects and individual gains. While the relationships in the novels certainly serve the characters’ own interests, they are more than just that. In their essence, they are crucial agents in the self-preservation of the characters as such. While looking at the story of all three main protagonists, Frances, Marianne and Connell, it is indisputable that the moment they lose the support network of the relationships with their loved ones, they succumb to loneliness. The isolation has a detrimental effect on their mental health which is just as harmful to them as selfishness is to the counterparts in the relationships, if not more.

In spite of the selfish motivations present in the relationships, the characters’ sentiment towards one another is undeniably genuine. Time and again, the relationships succeed in uplifting the characters involved, as well as in bringing happiness and stability to their lives. Moreover, as it is revealed by the turn of events which occur near the end of both stories, the reestablishment of the previously lost ties proves to be a crucial healing experience for the protagonists. The mental state of Frances, Marianne and Connell improves through support and love provided to them in their relationships, despite the fundamental differences in their nature. That is to say, Frances’ story ends with her rejecting traditional monogamous love in favour of maintaining a relationship with both Bobbi and Nick, despite the intricacy of such unconventional decision. Conversely, Connell and Marianne find refuge and contentment in the privacy of their love for another. Little else matters to them because “if two people make each other happy then it’s working” (320), as Frances puts it.

Hence, while the factor of class plays a key role in the romantic relationships of both books, it would appear that at the end of the stories all of them are prepared to move beyond it. That is to

say, they have matured, or they at least believe that they have, enough to put aside their class-induced differences and preconceptions in favour of cultivation the relationships which are of the utmost importance to them. In the end, the characters of both novels are mutually dependent, whether it is selfish or not. Nevertheless, by their caring for others, the characters are pushed to be more selfless themselves. This course of action occurs even in spite of their underlying tendencies ingrained in them by the influence of the environment in which they live. Therefore, love and caring for others appears to be the answer to their search for a counterbalance to the aggressively individualistic capitalist system surrounding them.

## **8.2 Journey of the protagonists and its conclusion**

The preceding chapters have already examined the principal features of the characters' personalities and motivations, as well as their causes and effects. All that remains is to ponder the outcome of their journey defined by their search for individuality and sustenance. Over the course of the novels, the three main protagonists, Frances, Marianne and Connell, are united by their deep-seated desire for an amelioration of their station in life. However, for each of them, it is represented by a different entity. Frances seeks an acclaim for her writing and an advancement of her living situation, whereas Marianne pursues a validation of her inner worth through the approval of others. Lastly, Connell chases an inner contentment by the means of education and upward social mobility.

Simultaneously, each of them strives to escape from some power engaging in their life. For Frances and Connell, it is their inborn social and material condition which is laden with circumstances of instability and absence of intellectual validation. In spite of her secure social and material situation, Marianne too longs to break free from the influence of her abusive family and later other relationships which deprive her of dignity. In general, the protagonists thus seek a certain liberation from the oppressive presences in their lives, which is a tendency reminiscent of a thought proposed in the theoretical part of this thesis. If we circle back to the assumption that one of Marxism's foundational principles was the pursuit of freedom from oppression, it is evident that this notion manifests in the background of the two novels as well.

Generally speaking, all of the characters pursue this goal by interacting with the social hierarchy, resisting or surrendering to their inborn social-class position and lastly, by building and maintaining relationships with others. With the journey and its obstacles already deliberated in the previous chapters, there arises the issue of the outcome of the character's efforts. While their character development over the course of their journey is indisputable, the accomplishment of their goals, and the escape from oppression in particular, is not as certain and straightforward.

As it was pointed out in earlier chapters, at the end of her story, Frances' social standing has not been improved. Moreover, she has acquiesced to accepting a regular job which she earlier found ideologically displeasing. In this aspect, Frances has thus de facto submitted to the traditional social expectations and her pre-determined position within society. Marianne goes through a parallel journey. Initially, she also finds having a job incompatible with her value system, as she considers it to be unacceptable "to exchange, in other words, blocks of her extremely limited time on this earth for the human invention known as money" (108). However, at the end of the story, Marianne has to reevaluate this rather conceited idea, since she no longer has the luxury to afford to maintain it. When she is cut off from her family, she has no other option than to enter into an employment. While Frances and Marianne are by no means free from the demand of the capitalist market to generate capital in order to be able to support themselves financially, the situation has also another dimension to it. By accepting a job, they are no longer dependent on their unreliable or abusive families which, in result, liberates them both materially and emotionally.

If we consider the symbolic level of the two novels, Frances and Connell's fight against the social hierarchy is eventually futile. Their efforts to be accepted into the bourgeois society only exacerbate their sense of liminality and even trigger mental-health issues. However, in terms of their character development, it brings both of them a certain clarity about the order of things. While Frances has not yet succeeded in discovering her identity, her journey revealed to her the power she holds regardless of her social status. Therefore, even though the struggle proved pointless on the large scale of things, it was essential in Frances' pursuit of self-determination. Similarly, Connell gradually realises the discontent he experiences by exchanging social capital with his bourgeois acquaintances who will never accept him as he is. Eventually, Connell finds contentment in his individuality and akin to Frances, he is liberated by abandoning the pursuit of social betterment.

As the novels are primarily preoccupied with the character's inner worlds and identity, it is therefore those aspects through which the reader notices the greatest change in the characters. All of the protagonists are at the end, in some aspect, liberated as opposed to the moment when the reader meets them for the first time. For Frances, the freedom lies in her rejection of traditional relationships and abandonment of social-status advancement. For Connell and Marianne, it is the acceptance of their abnormality and reconciliation with their liminal position in the societal hierarchy. Altogether, while neither of them is free of the material capitalist world and its societal influences at large, they are ultimately liberated on the inside by the clarity at which they arrive.

### 8.3 Maintaining the status quo and struggling against it

Sally Rooney's novels have been critiqued for being "insufficiently political" (Crain), as her characters fall short in the light of their belief systems which aspire towards refusal of traditional norms. In *Conversations with Friends*, this is quite noticeably the case of Frances. In *Normal People*, Marianne also fails to live up to her moral ideals, while Connell's position is often limited by his lack of power. Both novels are also accompanied by various superficial mentions of discussions of political topics and current affairs ranging from "Israeli peace talks" (*Normal People* 167) to "the war in Syria" and "the invasion of Iraq" (*Conversations with Friends* 304). However, discussions and assertions of bold statements are the place where the characters' activism seems to draw the line.

Frances' radical views range from her scorn of performing "an economic role" (23) by having a job, to outright assertion that she wants to "destroy capitalism" (75). Yet, in her actual behaviour, there is little activism that would put those beliefs into action. Marianne, who is passionate about political justice, chooses to avoid confrontation when it would harm her social credit. Connell who resents the mentality of the bourgeois society, still makes an effort to be accepted by them for the benefits it might bring him, as he is hoping to "have a different life" (217). When faced with a choice to assert their values through actions, the characters often choose the route that is more secure and profitable for them, thus essentially choosing to uphold the status quo.

Unlike Bobbi or Marianne who come from relatively wealthy families, Frances and Connell are limited in their ability to fight against the order of things as well as their own material condition. Their maintenance of the status quo is therefore largely driven by necessity and self-preservation, whereas Marianne, Bobbi, or even Nick and Melissa, have no need to challenge the social hierarchy at the heart of the novels altogether, as it affirms their privileged position. Moreover, the protagonists are oftentimes too fractured by the various oppressive forces around them. They are therefore fully focused on their self-preservation and unable to dedicate themselves to breaking down the prevalent social hierarchy and institutions.

Both of the novels, demonstrate the futility of such resistance which leads to the characters' liminality and mental-health problems both directly and indirectly. It also shows the power of the ruling class' hegemony which is used to perpetuate the status quo. Frances' fellow intern notes that "privilege gets perpetuated" by affluent people "taking unpaid internships and getting jobs off the back of them" (18). When Connell contemplates the possibility of losing a job that was acquired for him by Frances' friend, he is unbothered by the prospect, since "one of Marianne's other rich friends will just come up with another job for him to do" (99). The books thus subtly allude to the reality of hegemony being maintained since "rich people look out for each other" (99), as Connell bitterly observes.

The maintenance of hegemony is also captured in the background of literary industry present in both stories. As the theoretical part of the thesis has mentioned, one defining feature of culture is, after all, its function a propagandist weapon of the ruling classes. Aside from one published story, Frances achieves no literary acclaim, since she loses the favour of Melissa and in turn Valerie. It is apparent that Frances' success has always been dependent on the two women with a superior class status. Through their influence, Melissa and Valerie can decide whose texts are allowed to be added to the officially published literary canon. This way, they fundamentally control the content of the discourse through which the ruling class maintains its hegemony. Connell, who studies literature in hopes of becoming a writer himself, may one day find himself in a similarly futile situation, despite his significant achievements as a student. The access of the two working-class characters to the public discourse thus appears to be systematically restricted, as is their ability to potentially challenge the status quo by the means of it.

At the end of the novels, Frances and Marianne's theoretical belief systems prove to be highly unattainable when the two are faced with the reality of life. Their conduct has to be governed, first and utmost, by their basic material needs. Similarly, Connell has to come to terms with the reality of things and accept the mundane over the unattainable. Frances' non-traditional stance on relationships, Connell's acceptance of his liminal position, Marianne's abandonment of her family, along with its wealth and privilege, all of these are the ways in which the characters choose to challenge the status quo at the end of their stories. The characters' struggle against the traditional order of things thus occurs strictly in the private domain, since they have no chance of succeeding in bringing the altercation into the rigid and impenetrable social structure of the public domain.

## 9. Conclusion

The principal aim of this thesis was to analyse the novels *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* from the perspective of Marxist literary criticism. After having determined the foundations of Marxism and its principles within the field of literary theory, these findings were applied to the study of the novels, in particular the characters and relationships portrayed in them. These have been studied, primarily, with regard to the concepts of social class and standing, class struggle, liminality and hegemony, all of which have been determined as key notions to be considered in Marxist literary analysis. The overall objective was to then determine whether is Marxist theory embedded within the structure of the novels, as Sally Rooney herself claims, and if so, then in what manner it manifests in them.

The findings in the theoretical part of the thesis have shed a light on the main principles of Marxism, including its historical dimension and the ideological foundation on which it was built. It has been observed that the body of theory developed by Karl Marx in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has touched a number of areas other than political theory, with which it is usually associated, including social sciences, cultural and historical studies. As the theoretical part has outlined, at the heart of Marxist theory lies Marx's conception of the world as a perpetual clash of the bourgeoisie and the working class whose fight for dominance is caused by material inequality and their contending interests. The system, which allows for this cycle to be perpetuated, was identified by Marx as capitalism and, although it has evolved since his times, it persists even nowadays. The theoretical part has established this to be the principal reason as to why Marxism still remains relevant. Its chief value is not one of a political ideology, but that of a critique of capitalism and with it linked inequalities, both economical and social.

Having established the ideological background of Marxism and its main principles, the theoretical part of the thesis has proceeded with its probe into Marxist theory by focusing on Marxism in relation to literature, since literature was after all the thesis' main objective. This section of the thesis called to the attention the fact that culture has a dual nature within the Marxist framework, both of which ought to be acknowledged as equally important. The culture functions as a tool of class-struggle propaganda, as well as a reflection of the economic base. The latter has been identified as the foundational principle of Marxist literary theory which aims to interpret literature in its full context, including the author, historical period and society it portrays. To this end, Marxist literary criticism explores texts with the aid of several key areas of interest which allow us to establish a comprehensive picture of the given piece of writing. In particular, we explore the role and effects of notions such as, the social class, base and superstructure, class struggle and hegemony.

Since the findings had established that Marxist literary criticism requires us to study literature in context, the next section of the thesis' theoretical part set out to determine the background of the two selected novels. Beginning with a brief overview of the modern Irish history, the thesis has found out that the development of the contemporary state of the Republic of Ireland has largely been determined by several significant social changes which have occurred in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Among those, we may mention the decline of the Catholic church, the financial crisis of the 2010s and altered social-class structure in which the dominant factor has become the wealth, rather than just pedigree. In connection to this, the thesis has also discovered that a certain tendency of regional bias and classism prevails in the Irish society, especially within the education system which in turn affects one's further job prospects. The second component of the novel's background, which was studied, was the person of the author herself. There has been introduced several major influences on Sally Rooney's writing, such as her experience as a competitive debater and her time at Trinity college, which are among the experiences iterated on the pages of her novels. The most important knowledge for this thesis has, however, been the discovery of Rooney's upbringing which has led to her interest in Marxist theory later on during her studies, and her tendency to embed this framework in the structure of her writing.

All the aforementioned findings from the theoretical part have enabled us to proceed to the Marxist literary analysis of the novels themselves in the context of their setting and selected concepts of Marxist theory. We commenced the analysis with Sally Rooney's debut book, *Conversations with Friends*, featuring the originally working-class protagonist Frances who is, essentially, compelled by the established social system to desire for a better position in life. Nevertheless, there has been uncovered the impenetrability of the social hierarchy and the impassivity of the dominant classes, represented by the couple of Nick and Melissa, which ultimately set Frances up for failure in her endeavour and even lead to her liminality. Lastly, there was studied the manifestation of class struggle within Frances and Nick's affair. Within their dynamic, we have observed the power imbalance caused by Nick's upper-class status, but also Frances' futile hunger to better herself through relationship.

The second novel, *Normal People*, has been examined using the same procedure with a primary focus on the aspect of social class. The protagonists Marianne and Connell are both equally defined by their social background which determines their desire for social acclaim, regardless of their class differences. Marianne, despite belonging to the bourgeoisie, is intent on being liked by her peers to the to point that she, at times, even betrays her rigorous values in order to maintain her position on the social ladder. Connell, who comes from a working-class background, is just as desperately protective of his public face, however, by the virtue of his lower social standing, he is

unable to succeed in the elitist social hierarchy. The analysis has proved that the protagonists' class differences, prejudices and misapprehensions are what divides them, in spite of their mutual respect and love. As we have observed, the tension of class struggle is removed only when they accept their liminality and they are thus no longer burdened by class.

The final section of the practical part set out to examine the two novels in relation to one another and a broader perspective of the world as seen through the lens of Marxist theory. In particular, there has been demonstrated how the aggressively individualistic principles of the capitalist system exhibit even in the morality of the characters and in turn their self-serving course of action even in their relationships. While we have concluded that love under capitalism, as depicted in the books, is indeed selfish, it is also a sustaining and healing presence in the characters' lives which aids them in moving beyond the established borders of class division. When examining the journey of the protagonists, we have uncovered an echo of one of Marxism's foundational principle in the form of underlying struggle for freedom from oppression. It has been determined while the characters are unable to achieve emancipation from the system at large, they are liberated on the inside through their journey. As for the maintenance of status quo, the thesis has discovered that despite the protagonists' ideals of social justice, they are all unable to challenge the order of things on a large scale, either due to their system-inflicted wounds or general lack of class-induced power. It has been established that, instead, they have to acquiesce to defying it merely in the private domain.

To bring this thesis to an end, all that remains is to decisively either confirm or disprove the hypothesis that was stated in the introduction. That is to say, there ought to be determined whether Sally Rooney's novels, *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, incorporate a Marxist framework in their structure. The analysis of the novels has proved that Sally Rooney does indeed look upon the world that surrounds her from a perspective of Marxist theory, or rather, a perspective that is conscious of Marxist principles and the way they manifest in the world. As it was determined, the factor of class, as well as other associate concepts of Marxism, play a significant role in Rooney's novels in spite of them being centered around intimate portraits of characters and their relationships, rather than a revolutionary parable. The two examined novels are not typically Marxist texts, if we look upon them in terms of ideological or political propaganda, but they are certainly novels written with a Marxist sensibility. As for myself, I hope the thesis has proved that the label of Marxism does not have to be perceived as having only negative connotations. Instead, this thesis was to be a testimony to Marxism's usefulness and relevance as a tool for critically assessing not only literature but also the day and age we find ourselves in.

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