

On the Identity Writing of *Normal People* by Sally Rooney

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Sally Rooney is a contemporary Irish woman writer. Her novel *Normal People* shows the anxiety and struggle of Irish youth in the new era with her delicate and unique writing style. Centering on identity, this paper explores the phenomenon of identity loss and the process of identity construction caused by the urban-rural and class differences of the characters in the book, and analyzes the new confusion and demands of Irish millennials in the context of globalization.

Keywords: Sally Rooney, *Normal People*, identity

Introduction

Famous contemporary Irish female writer Sally Rooney (1991-) was born in a remote town in the west of Ireland, the well-known media *New York Times* called her “the first great writer of the Millennial generation”, and the *New Yorker* also emphasized her “millennial” identity. Rooney’s success is more than just coincidence and luck. Her writing is easy to understand and her language is clear and concise. The details in her work highlight the confusion and struggle behind the complicated trifles and contradictions in ordinary people’s lives, and it is the idea of close to life in the book that touches the inner world of the vast number of readers. Her works also have a certain artistic aesthetic value. The author skillfully uses the crises and difficulties faced by characters from different family backgrounds and different living conditions to show different degrees of self-identity construction process. Moreover, we can find the commonalities between the characters and the commonalities between the fictional world and the real world, so as to further show social authenticity.

Nowadays, Ireland in the 21st century is no longer a representative of the wild, strange, and remote, while with the rapid development of the “Celtic Economic Tiger”, Irish culture has a new political appeal and cultural metaphor. Most scholars focus their research on Irish literature before the 21st century, which is full of regional and time-specific national colors, and focuses on the political metaphors, core images, and cultural intentions of the text. At present, *Normal People* has not received extensive attention from the academic community. Chinese scholars have only one paper on *Normal People* from the perspective of the influence of contemporary culture on narcissism, and western scholars have only a few pieces of literature and reviews, mainly focusing on the confusion and contradictions of the millennial generation and gender status. This paper analyzes and discusses some social problems mentioned in *Normal People*, which will help to add perspective to the study of modern and contemporary Irish literature.

Two Image Transformation From Normal to Abnormal: Sheridan and Waldron’s Identity Construction

Normal People revolves around the ambiguous relationship between two youngsters Marianne Sheridan and

Connell Waldron. Marianne is seen as the representative of “abnormal” in high school, while she was born in a wealthy family in a small town in the west of Ireland, and Connell’s mother works in Marianne’s home as a housekeeper. Marianne is unsociable and eccentric, and often conducts outrageous behavior, so her classmates call her a freak, but she is smart and does well in school. Connell is the school’s star player; although he is introverted, his handsome appearance and friendly way of making friends help him shine in the school. During this period, Marianne fell in love with the sunny and handsome Connell and willingly became his “underground girlfriend” to maintain their relationship. Connell took the different view; however, he was afraid that his classmates would find out that he had deliberately concealed the fact of his abnormal relationship with Marianne, but more importantly, he was unwilling to admit his romantic feelings for the absurd girl. “A lot of people hated her... Associating with her would only bring him down, as she is an object of public loathing” (Rooney, 2018, p. 3). But the staunchly independent Marianne encouraged the young and confused Connell at that time, and the two eventually enrolled together at Trinity University. Ironically, the identity of the two people has undergone a seismic shift in Dublin. Connell is difficult to integrate into the group confined to the background, and gradually becomes the representative of the “abnormal” in their social circle. And Marianne is therefore making many friends because of her superior family background. The text is full of examples of identity issues, as well as profound reflections on contemporary Irish social problems.

“Gareth said, ‘I love your backpack, it’s very nineties.’ Connell was wearing an extremely plain navy-blue backpack with no features to distinguish it from the countless backpacks at the party” (Rooney, 2018, p. 61). Gareth was a flamboyant celebrity at Trinity University and attended an exclusive private school in Dublin as a child. This is what he said to Connell when he threw a party at the university. At this moment, Connell was a newcomer and had a strong sense of discomfort towards everything unfamiliar around him. Relationships are no longer as simple as they are in a small western town, and students in Dublin seem to be born with a pair of colored glasses that reflect your background through your exterior. Connell’s first social interaction at the university was a rather unsuccessful one, as he tried to hide the homemade apple juice in his backpack as he saw fellow students drinking Budweiser. This rural-urban divide began to create anxiety and estrangement in Connell, sowing the seeds of self-doubt and a lack of identity. It also depicts a lingering sense of disdain and stereotype about the backwardness of the west of Ireland. “Peggy turned to her with round eyes. ‘Have you ever been to Berlin? I thought they wouldn’t allow people in Connacht to go out that far. The countryside must give you a holiday’” (Rooney, 2018, p. 133). All this implied that Dubliners had the unchanging impression of the remote western small city in Ireland’s poor countryside. Rooney once said in *New Yorker*, “I am trying to describe a universal social situation, and in the process, I hope readers can break their rigid understanding of society” (Rooney, 2022). The urban-rural differences reflected in the book are common in the society, and Rooney points the finger at the corruption and rigidity of the capitalist system—the pursuit of power and money blurs the standards of good and evil, but strengthens interpersonal boundaries. She once stated that capitalism is destroying the world and has the power and opportunity to protest and oppose in various forms within the system, but ultimately these voices will still serve the system. Due to the influence of socialism on Rooney from a young age, she lamented the humanitarianism and superiority of the socialist system and said in the book, “This country needs a bit of communism” (Rooney, 2018, p. 42). Identity construction and value realization cannot be separated from the living environment and social background. The author uses the text to explain the lack of spiritual world behind the rapid development of the material economy. The mismatched development model will ultimately affect the healthy development of people and society.

Connell, who studied in the English studies, said that reading aloud would be a class performance of cultural nature. Educated people are obsessed with literature because it can take them to experience a false emotional process. They like to read the emotional process of uneducated people, so that they can feel superior to those people after reading (Rooney, 2018, p. 210). “How difficult it is to make friends on Trinity... the people here are all snobs. That’s why it’s so easy for you, by the way, because your family is very wealthy, that’s why they like you” (Rooney, 2018, p. 83). After Connell and Marianne exchanged identities and positions, he could not help but feel the sense of frustration as a marginalized member of the university social circle, which led to his suffering from depression, feeling homeless, and unable to obtain a sense of belonging. Even his decision to choose Trinity University also left him in agony—unable to integrate into his current circle or return to his previous life. When he heard that his high school friend had committed suicide, Connell gradually fell into endless panic over his lost future and layers of choices, and was ultimately forced to fall into a state of identity loss. The author once told *New Yorker* about her psychological state at Trinity University in an interview: “On the one hand, I was shocked, but on the other hand, I want to prove to them that I can be as good as these dignitaries” (Rooney, 2022). Rooney chose to go to the United States to study for a Master of Arts, and called this period “class transition period”. As is well known, the idea of promoting class through learning has long been instilled in the education system of today’s society, as if poor people can change their origins and rise to higher class by receiving higher education. However, the rebirth of things often comes with pain, and Connell’s series of experiences in Dublin all indicate that in order to break the balance in a predetermined state, the first step is to accept his original identity symbols and labels. Grades and class distinctions are not only evident at Trinity University, which gathers Irish dignitaries—“the parents of students here are either judges or government ministers”. Even in remote western towns, life has long been labeled as hierarchical. Their social life is hierarchical, with some at the top, some pushing and shoving in the middle, and others at the bottom (Rooney, 2018, p. 26). Undoubtedly, Marianne was an isolated marginal person in high school, and the reason for her isolation was also due to her “abnormal” aspects—she did not like to wear school uniforms and accepted arbitrary school rules which were seen as “normal” by others. Marianne’s attitude and behavior are more like a “derailment” phenomenon within a certain group or class. All kinds of outliers demonstrate her savage growth under the constraints of traditional ethics. And Saint Trinity seemed to be the right track for her, so she had a large number of friends and a normal social circle, leading a life of “normal people”. The author does not confine Marianne’s identity construction to a fixed class or identity. She does not have the hesitation of Connell when losing her identity, nor does she have the usual arrogance of Dublin. You can find both “normal” and “abnormal” shadows in her. More importantly, she is brave enough to break through rules and boundaries and passionate about pursuing self-worth. The intentional blurring of this identity boundary also symbolizes the identity issue that the author wants to express—the realization of self-worth requires a strong sense of self-identity, and the eruption of ideas that are not limited by class frameworks can become a powerful weapon to break tradition and boundaries. During countless gatherings during his university years, Connell often remained silent. When people expressed their personal opinions enthusiastically, he chose to listen silently. He only occasionally spoke in the literary field where he excelled, and only served as a reminder or supplement when other classmates encountered bottlenecks in speaking. Connell’s silent state gradually made him the “silent majority”, and the identity anxiety brought about by the environment made him unable to adapt. Connell’s silence symbolizes the phenomenon of aphasia among many young people from working class families in Ireland—confusion and hesitation, striving to integrate into Dublin’s life, but unable to completely break away from their original identity. Connell ultimately took self-help measures

and actively went to the psychological counseling room for treatment. After befriending Helen, who had the same class status as himself, he deeply felt that he had finally become an accepted person. This “normal” romantic relationship gradually reconstructed his own understanding which helped him eventually move towards a “normal person”. The awakening of his self-identity also helped him resist fate, no longer willing to be passive and silent, and ultimately chose to go to the United States for further education.

Local and Global: The Millennial Identity Writing

Irish literature is the most widely known for its strong characteristics of the times and regions. At the beginning of the 19th century, the struggle for national independence was on the rise. In literature, political ballads that eulogize patriotic leaders and satirize the British colonial authorities were very popular. Before the formation of Irish national literature, literature represented by novels began to take shape. Most novels originate from folk legends, depicting the remote, primitive, and quirky Celtic world (Chen, 2011, p. 192). In the later period, various literary genres also revolved around the national movement—the Great Famine after 1845, the failure of the “Young Ireland” armed uprising in 1848, the establishment of the “Irish Republic Brothers Alliance” in 1858, the Fenny Movement in the 1960s, and so on. The literary field echoed the national independence movement. It is not difficult to see that early English and Irish works were dominated by significant locality and ethnicity, and there were many cultural metaphors and political demands in the text.

The contemporary Irish work *Normal People* preserves and continues some of the traditional regional characteristics of Ireland. There are many scenes depicting the countryside in western Ireland in the text, which form a strong contrast with the prosperity and luxury of metropolises, which echoes the regional differences between the east and the west in traditional Irish literature. At the same time, in the portrayal of numerous characters, it is not difficult to find differences in people’s thinking patterns from the eastern and western regions, which in turn exacerbates a series of social contradictions and conflicts. The loss and reconstruction of character identities in novels are to some extent based on the rejection and acceptance of regional and social differences.

Similarly, the author also added globalization elements to the text, as transportation, population mobility, and communication methods are all products of globalization. The rapid development of the global economy has driven the evolution of transportation and played a significant role in promoting global population mobility. Marianne chose to visit Switzerland during her university years; Connell chose to go to the United States for further study; and Rooney herself also chose to go to the United States for “class transition”. In the context of globalization, population mobility and class leap are urgent issues that all emerging developing countries need to face. Talent is a necessary condition for national development, and regional mobility with class labels will inevitably hinder the positive development of talent. Regional mobility leads to identity mobility, and the loss and difficulties caused by identity mobility often result in a certain degree of identity loss. How to de-label and regionalize in the path of globalization is also an urgent issue for Ireland to consider and solve. There are numerous descriptions of characters communicating by email in Rooney’s two works *Normal People* and *Conversations With Friends*. The style of email dialogue highlights a new form of communication in modern society, and technology has brought huge impacts and changes to life, enriching the way society produces and lives.

In contrast, the perspective of contemporary Irish literature works no longer focuses on the problems left by the predecessors. With the advancement of the times, the perspective of literature has gradually become civilized.

In terms of characters, backgrounds, themes, metaphors, etc., they have all got rid of narrow regionalism. The purpose of the text is to pay more attention to the current personal growth and development, and no longer spend a lot of ink on excessive writing of national identity, cultural anxiety, and patriotism.

This change is inseparable from the development process of the country—the Republic of Ireland’s economy began to develop rapidly in the 1990s, and it was not until the 2007-2008 global economic crisis that the economy slowed down for the first time. Ireland has been baptized by globalization, and its people’s lives have been impacted in multiple ways. Technology has provided people with richer choices, and its vision and perspective are no longer limited to Gaelic culture. The perspective of literature has naturally changed, and it is more focused on the spiritual demands of the people at present. Writers express human emotions more centrally, faithfully, and bluntly, reflecting the intricate nature of humanity, without having to worry too much about its nature and social consequences (Chen, 2011, p. 17). The text presents more of the characters’ ordinary conversations, inner dynamics, subtle emotional entanglements and crises, as well as the social issues that the author wants to elucidate. Those characters not only represent distinct “individuals”, but also reflect a certain type of “group” in contemporary society. From the living conditions and personal anxieties of different groups, we can see the varying degrees of ideological collision and spiritual tension in the growth and life of Irish millennial youth. The writing of regional mobility is no longer aimed at reflecting colonial oppression and awakening national patriotism, and the focus is more on the construction of personal identity issues.

Conclusion

Rooney stated in an interview that when writing, she did not impose personal thoughts on characters or express individual opinions through their mouths. She even wanted to completely separate the work from herself, allowing readers to fully experience and interpret the text, and hoping that they would take the initiative to break some stereotypes. Moreover, for some of the private relationships in the book, Rooney suggests that these relationships mostly arise in private spaces that are far from the public eye and without criticism or surveillance. In such an environment with privacy characteristics, people focus their attention on primitive needs and preferences, away from material transactions, and can better inspire people to think about their understanding and demands for love (Rooney, 2022). The choice of characters and the direction of the plot in the novel have resonated widely with readers. Although the author clearly stated in the interview that the characters in her book are fictional and have no prototypes, it is precisely because of the existence of so many commonalities that there is a voice for the “millennial generation”. From the living conditions and personal anxieties of different groups, we can see the varying degrees of ideological collision and spiritual tension in the growth and life of Irish millennial youth. Literature is a product of the times, and a full understanding of the Irish era background helps to understand the purpose of the text, as well as the setting of characters and plot. The globalization background strengthens the ink of technology and modernization. Similarly, literature also serves the society. Through writing, the author presents the changes and development of culture of Ireland’s culture and society in the context of globalization from a certain perspective, and reflects his thoughts and concerns about Ireland’s new ways and directions. The millennial generation does not need to be trapped in the social problems and economic difficulties created by the older generation, and writers gradually break free from the constraints of a single Gaelic culture and move towards rebirth and diversity. In what form should literary works be reshaped and given back to society at present, it is more worthwhile for writers to think deeply.

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