

# Trauma and Shame in *Conversations with Friends*

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Sally Rooney, a young Irish writer, has been dubbed “the first great novelist of the millennial generation”. *Conversations with Friends*, her first work, demonstrates amazing insight and subtle expression as she explores a wide range of realistic issues such as modern intimacy, class injustice, and politics, all while depicting the complex interaction between two college girls and a celebrity couple from Dublin. This paper will use psychoanalytic viewpoints from scholars such as Freud, Garland, and Kaufman to examine the trauma and shame experienced by the heroine Frances, as well as the possibilities and ways in which adults can heal the trauma. Rooney completes the trauma narrative of modern people by portraying the life and feelings of Frances, a normal modern youth.

**Keywords:** Sally Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, trauma, shame

## I. Introduction

Trauma is defined as the long-term and widespread psychological harm produced by a traumatic incident. Sigmund Freud defined trauma as “an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way, and this must result in permanent disturbances of the manner in which the energy operates” (Freud, 1963, p. 275). In the seventeenth century, trauma was first studied in the medical field. Usually, shame is experienced in connection with a community. An unpleasant emotional feeling of anguish, disgrace, and dishonor directed at oneself, shame centres on the self and is negatively assessed and analysed. Shame is often accompanied by typical behavioral responses: submission, desire to escape, hiding and concealment (Gilbert, 2000).

*Conversations with Friends* (Rooney, 2017)<sup>0</sup> is the debut novel by Sally Rooney, acclaimed as an outstanding young writer of the millennium. The story is narrated in the first person by Frances, a student and poet at Trinity College Dublin. Throughout the novel, she recounts her friendships with several people, primarily her best friend and ex-girlfriend Bobbi, their new acquaintance Melissa, and her husband Nick. Frances and Nick quickly embark on an intermittent romantic relationship, initially unknown to Bobbi and Melissa, who also seem to display a hint of romantic interest in each other. Frances’ narrative closely revolves around the relationships between these four points and how they intermingle and coexist, but she also delves into her own relationships with her parents. Frances’ father, Dennis, is an alcoholic who sometimes turns violent towards her and her mother, and yet they rarely confront him about his drinking.

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In an interview with Emma Brookes, Rooney revealed that she was more interested in the echo of the trauma than the trauma itself and “how do people who have endured certain kinds of violence, trauma or psychological breakdown carry on afterwards?” (Brookes, 2021). Shame and trauma are linked, and this work explores how these two elements affect the heroine’s life. This paper will examine the novel’s writing of trauma and shame by closely examining the text.

## II. Trauma and Shame

Cathy Caruth claims that: “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth, 1996, p. 91). The most influential authors on the issue—Sigmund Freud or Cathy Caruth, among many others—agree on the abrupt and unexpected occurrence of the incident, and the shock it produces on the mind. Ireland as a country is also historically accustomed to trauma, yet as the world narrative has become more orientated towards collective memory and trauma, contemporary Irish literature coincidentally abandons the grand narrative and uses the microcosmic perspective of a single person or family to display a more personalized emotional experience and expression of identity (Chen, 2021). It also shows more individual narratives of trauma.

With the development of psychoanalytic theory, shame has been understood more in the context of interpersonal interaction processes (e.g., the relationship between self and object). In the psychodynamic schools, shame has begun to be associated with the object. Levin, for example, points to the relationship between shame and cultural rules, arguing that it is self-exposure, rejection by others, or the anticipation of self-exposure and rejection by others that motivates shame (Levin, 1971). It can thus serve to regulate interpersonal contact and ensure that the individual is not rejected by the object.

Shame is quite different to trauma in many aspects, but it is also related to it. Shame has been linked to “the internal experience of the self as undesirable, unattractive, defective, worthless and powerless” (Pinto-Gouveia, 2011, p. 281), and associated with “being defective or inadequate in some way ... an experience of the self-related to how we think we exist in the minds of others” (p. 281). In the experience of shame, our actions derive from an external perception of ourselves—importance lies in how others view us, rather than how we view ourselves. As seen later on in the analyses of the novels, victims suffering from either shame or trauma may desire to keep it hidden, as if to lessen its effects.

In the characters of *Conversations with Friends*, trauma and shame are so prevalent that they have an almost overwhelming impact on their bodies and brains. As seen by subsequent readings of the book, the protagonist who experiences trauma or shame can want to conceal it in order to lessen the negative impact of the incident on himself.

## III. Causes of Trauma—Family and Childhood

In the novel’s many flashbacks, we piece together the childhood trauma that Frances suffered. Her father’s lack of role, habitual neglect, alcoholism, domestic violence, and her mother’s habitual suppression and compliance all exacerbated Frances’ trauma. Freud believed that young children experience trauma much more frequently than we think. Children are more psychologically vulnerable than adults and usually encounter many

traumatic experiences. Frances does not directly mention the violence itself in her narrative, but refers to her father's "moods", including his temper or throwing things (Rooney, 2017, p. 49). During these stages, Frances gradually learned to retreat not to anger him: "I was cold like a fish" (Rooney, 2017, p. 49). But at the same time, Frances also "learned not to display fear" and learned to suppress her feelings from then on. At this moment, Frances' narrative is calm and spectator-like. Still, she deliberately expresses the traumatic events of her childhood in an indirect way, which also contains Frances' shameful psychological defense emotions from the first-person perspective.

From the infant's perspective, the mother's power is almost omnipotent. The first person a girl identifies with is her mother, and a strong mother figure will give her a sense of self-worth. A girl who cannot identify with her mother will find it difficult to feel confident. Unfortunately, young Frances was not comforted by her mother. When her father lost his temper and threw Frances' shoe into the fire, her mother, instead of comforting and protecting her, accused her: "Why didn't you lift it out of the fire?" (Rooney, 2017, p. 49). We can see that her mother never resisted, and she always seemed to keep silent about their marriage, but insisted that Frances visit him and even love her father. "You must love him, she told me when I was sixteen. He's your father" (Rooney, 2017, p. 175). Frances' mother never realized the harm her husband's abuse of her and her daughter would cause to the young child, and she remained silent and did not approve of Frances' rejection of her father. On the other hand, her mother did not have the ability to love to give Frances enough emotional support.

In fact, this essentially non-supportive mother-daughter relationship continued until Frances became an adult and lived separately. "My mother didn't enforce these visits, but lately when we spoke on the phone she'd started saying things like: Oh, you're alive, are you? Am I going to recognise you next time you come home, or will you have a flower in your lapel?..." (Rooney, 2017, p. 46). These obviously oppressive words continued into Frances' adulthood. Pete Walker mentioned in *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* that continuous criticism will systematically destroy our self-esteem and eventually internalize into a toxic inner critic, constantly judging us as flawed beings (Walker, 2013, p. 91). She went home and visited her father. Her inner critic stood up to criticize herself and demanded that she do what her mother asked of her. Frances not only endured the absence and violence of her father, but also experienced long-term and profound trauma due to the emotional disconnection with her mother.

#### **IV. Self-injurious Behaviors and Shame in Social Interaction**

As an adult with invisible psychological trauma, Frances is deeply insecure about herself and feels worthless. She does not have a positive self-image and instead unconsciously seeks approval from those around her. Frances recalls her experiences at school as being "I was lonely and felt unworthy of real friendship. I made lists of things I had to improve about myself" (Rooney, 2017, p. 139). She seems to be overly sensitive to how others perceive her, "Nick said nothing and neither did I. His silence was significant mine was not..." (Rooney, 2017, p. 139). These words indicate her lack of self-esteem and her need for constant confirmation of her worth.

Trauma and shame both have a crucial influence on a person's identity development. Gershen Kaufman describes shame as: "...the affect of inferiority. No other affect is more central to the development of identity.

None is closer to the experienced self, nor more disturbing. Shame is felt as an inner torment” (Kaufman, 1989, p. 24). The continuation of the inferiority complex in childhood led Frances to use her body as a place of punishment in adulthood. She often has a tendency to self-harm, and most of the time this tendency is triggered by interactions with her family. When she visits her father and cleans up his messy kitchen, “watching the soap bubbles slide silently down the blades of the kitchen knives, I had a sudden desire to harm myself” (Rooney, 2017, p. 53). In Pete Walker’s opinion, flashback is a disturbing and intense regression, also known as Amygdala Hijack, which causes people to flash back to the unbearable feeling state of being abandoned in childhood. ... Once trapped in a flashback, fear, shame or depression will almost occupy your entire heart (Walker, 2013, p. 145). To some extent, this was her mother forcing her to see her father, and facing her father and this terrible life scene would cause Frances to instantly flash back to the painful memories of her childhood, which easily triggered extreme thoughts of self-harm. She needed the pain of self-injury to hide her inner pain and prove that she still existed. This was also fully demonstrated when she cut a hole in her left thigh after breaking up with Nick.

Frances lacks self-confidence, but is obsessed with creating a positive image in social situations, which makes her very concerned about what her friends think of her when Frances talked to her father on the phone during her trip to Etables, she was very vigilant to avoid everyone present. “I wandered a little away from the others then, but I didn’t want to leave them behind completely” (Rooney, 2017, p. 120). After the call, she would lightly say to her closest Bobbi, “Just Dad. No news” (Rooney, 2017, p. 121). Even when facing her former girlfriend Bobbi, she habitually hides and conceals. We can say that Frances’ shame makes her instinctive reaction to others is to hide her family situation and true feelings. All her words and behaviors in social interactions reflect her inner inferiority and shame.

On the other hand, all of Frances’ private emotional relationships are presented in a digital and textual form, becoming “conversations” that can be read and commented on by others, whether it is with her closest friend Bobbi, her distant and repressed parents, or her extramarital affair with Nick. This digital modern way of life also profoundly affects the individual’s psychological state and spiritual world. Frances’ obsession with Nick is both a morbid desire for love and a doubt about her own value.

## **V. The Possibility of Repairing Trauma from Intimate Relationships**

After a traumatic event, how to help traumatized individuals get rid of unspeakable fear has become one of the important topics in trauma research. Robert J. Lifton and other famous psychologists have found that after a traumatic event, injured individuals generally need to go through the following process: first, return to the event and try to integrate various fragments to gain an understanding of the event; second, integrate the experience into the reality of the individual’s understanding of the world; third, use narrative language to describe the experience (Liu, 2009, p. 69). After breaking up with Nick for a while, Frances honestly expressed her apology to Bobbi and her true feelings in a letter to Bobbi. This time, it was Frances who got their relationship back on track and tried to describe her true emotional experience in words. Once again, Frances returned to a life with only Bobbi as a friend, without Nick or Melissa. Frances seemed to have found some comfort and strength because she always liked to get along well with Bobbi. In addition, at the end of the book, in the conversation between mother and daughter and the mother’s behavior of reaching across the table to hold her daughter’s

hand, we can also see the easing of the relationship between mother and daughter and the possibility of gaining mutual recognition.

In comparison, we can see more possibilities for healing in the relationship between Frances and Nick. When Frances and Nick bring up her father's alcoholism, Nick shows Frances a rare sincerity and love, which obviously surprises Frances: "He unconsciously stroked my hair with his hands, as if he were someone else" (Rooney, 2017, p. 122). Frances thought she gained Nick's "unconditional" sympathy, which effectively offsets her inner shame. In the book *The neurotic personality of our time*, Karen Horney mentioned that "sexual desires may stimulate or pass into tender feelings" (Rooney, 2017, p. 148). This tenderness is bound to remain in Frances' heart after reflection and the precipitation of time. No doubt, all of this lays the foundation for the ending of the novel. In this misdialed call, they recalled their first kiss on the phone, Frances realized that her relationship with Nick was more than just "treated us like a resource" as Bobbi put it (Rooney, 2017, p. 305); Nick makes Frances feel valued and appreciated, and allows her to not hide her true feelings. Finally, Frances tries to integrate her own experience in reality into her understanding of the world. She has the right not to love anyone, and she also has the right to love anyone. As for Frances' life afterwards, Rooney finally leaves readers with a lot of room for imagination, and also gives the possibility of trauma healing.

## VI. Conclusion

Rooney's first novel *Conversations with Friends* shows the emotional dilemmas and interpersonal conflicts of modernity faced by millennial women represented by Frances. Beginning with the two elements of trauma and shame, this study investigates the root of Frances' trauma. Frances develops a poor self-esteem and sense of worthlessness as a result of her father's violence and her mother's blindness, leading her to fluctuate between seeking the approval of others to build self-esteem and shame, self-injury, and self-loathing as an adult. However, through Rooney's portrayal, we see that the dynamic of Frances' intimate relationships with individuals around her helps heal trauma, particularly Nick, who makes Frances feel comfortable with herself and realizes that she may love anybody she wants. This novel concentrates entirely on people's emotional connections, which influence the formation of their personalities. It teaches the reader the value of self-love and the importance of community in trauma recovery.

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