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THE COMING-OF-AGE JOURNEY IN *NORMAL PEOPLE*, BY SALLY ROONEY

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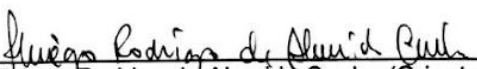
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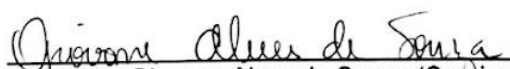
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“I won’t ask you to wait if you don’t ask me to stay
(...) Now I’m missing your smile, hear me out
We could just ride around
And the road not taken looks real good now
And it always leads to you in my hometown” - ‘tis
the damn season (Taylor Swift)

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THE COMING-OF-AGE JOURNEY IN *NORMAL PEOPLE*, BY SALLY ROONEY

A JORNADA DE COMING-OF-AGE EM *PESSOAS NORMAIS*, DE SALLY ROONEY

Danieli Dantas de Medeiros¹

ABSTRACT

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) shows the life between adolescence and adulthood of its protagonists, bringing several elements that help them to go through the growth process. This process is known in North American literature as coming-of-age, in which the characters face problems and challenges that will make them reach the stage of maturation. The objective of this work is to analyze how these elements will impact on their lives, such as socioeconomic class, anxiety, identity and insecurities, that are part of the *coming-of-age* of Connell and Marianne, the main characters. For the theoretical basis, these elements will be discussed from Paz (2023), Milchrahm (2023) and Rio (2022), among others. To carry out the research, the qualitative method of descriptive nature was used. *Normal People* brings the reality of contemporary youth society, and its style of young adult literature has the power to welcome readers who can identify with the situations portrayed in the work. By exploring the problematic relationships, identity formation and social context in Ireland within the narrative, it is possible to follow the characters' evolution until they are able to understand their place in the world.

Keywords: Coming-of-age; young adult literature; identity.

RESUMO

Pessoas Normais (2018) de Sally Rooney, mostra a vida entre a adolescência e a vida adulta dos seus protagonistas, trazendo diversos elementos que os ajudam a passar pelo processo de crescimento. Esse processo é conhecido na literatura norte-americana como *coming-of-age*, o qual os personagens enfrentam problemas e desafios que irão fazer eles chegarem ao estágio de maturação. O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar como esses elementos irão impactar na vida de Connell e Marianne, como a classe socioeconômica, ansiedade, identidade e inseguranças, que fazem parte do *coming-of-age* deles. Para o embasamento teórico, esses elementos serão discutidos a partir de Paz (2023), Milchrahm (2023) e Rio (2022), entre outros(as). Para realizar a pesquisa, foi utilizado o método qualitativo de natureza descritiva. *Pessoas Normais* traz a realidade da sociedade jovem contemporânea, e o seu estilo de *young adult literature* tem o poder de acolher leitores que podem se identificar com as situações retratadas na obra. Ao analisar as relações problemáticas, a formação de identidade e o contexto social na Irlanda dentro da narrativa, é possível acompanhar a evolução dos personagens até que eles possam entender o seu lugar no mundo.

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Palavras-Chave: Coming-of-age; *young adult literature*; identidade.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is through literature that the power of catharsis is transmitted to us. In it, we find a form of communication between the real and the imaginary, and we reflect on our identity. There are several audiences for various types of literature, and each person identifies with one. With this, we will focus on young adult literature, which explores characters' personal development and provides a universe of elements that can make the reader identify her or himself with.

Young adult literature can provide an interesting analysis of contemporary themes such as the search for identity and struggles regarding differences. The access to this type of literature encourages young readers to critically self-reflect on their own identity formation, and, as Fox (2010) points out, "adolescence is often a tumultuous time in a person's life. Often, adolescents feel isolated and unable to reach out to anyone. Literature can serve as a refuge from this sense of isolation".

The power of books and the stories told can serve both as inspiration and as a kind of "cure", because, as adults, we face confusing and challenging processes, we need to find a way to pay bills when leaving our parents' house and dealing with the fact that we no longer have the same privileges we had as children. Knowing that there are, even if in a fictional form, characters who are going through the same process, we feel comforted for not being alone, considering that literature can represent the life experience of its readers.

Normal People, by Sally Rooney, fits into young adult literature and makes the reader feel, in some way, represented, by bringing up current issues, such as capitalism, family relationships, interpersonal relationships, and the maturity that we must develop over time. By identifying with the characters, Connell and Marianne, the reader may realize that several other young people may have been inspired by these characters and feel welcomed.

According to the British newspaper *The Guardian*, the contemporary novel *Normal People* by Sally Rooney is "the literary phenomenon of the decade", and also, for the American newspaper, *The New York Times*, Sally Rooney is "the first great author of the millennial generation". According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, a "millennial is a person born between around 1981 and 1996". Sally Rooney's novels represent the millennial generation, with several elements presented, mainly in contemporary Ireland and after the Celtic Tiger, which sets the period in which the narrative takes place. According to Reynolds (2020), "Her novels, particularly *Normal People*, reflect the new generations' contradictions and epitomize twenty-first-century Irish writers' response to 'the chaos and intensity of the contemporary [...] as a moment of acceleration and flux'".

To build the research, we thought of reflecting on the following questions: How can the character find their place in the world and find themselves in view of the difficulties that appear along the way? And how does the work punctuate the coming-of-age and its characteristics in real-life contemporary youth society? By analyzing *Normal People*, we will try to get the answers to these questions that may be present in the minds of young adults, who may be going through moments of anxiety, depression, confusion, and discomfort, as well as Connell and Marianne, and trying to understand their role in the society as human beings.

The general objective of this work is to analyze the journey of coming-of-age of the characters Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron within the novel *Normal*

People, by Sally Rooney. Within this analysis, as our specific objectives, we will try to point out the social issues of the characters in the work, including bullying, anxiety, and depression; to consider the family background, and to identify the acquisition of personal development by Connell and Marianne as they mature, and how all this impacts on their behavior as adults.

To address the chosen themes, we will use the qualitative method to explore and analyze certain elements within the narrative, such as the coming-of-age and young adult literature. For Gerhardt and Silveira (2009, p. 31, our translation)² “Qualitative research is concerned, therefore, with aspects of reality that cannot be quantified, focusing on understanding and explaining the dynamics of social relations”. The present study also has a descriptive nature, which for Triviños (1987, p. 110, our translation)³, can be criticized because there may be an exact description of phenomena and facts [...] and research “requires a series of information about what you want to search for. This type of study intends to describe the facts and phenomena of a certain reality”. Thus, we will carry out an analysis of the reality of the characters and their social lives and behaviors by seeking to understand their characteristics.

To base the present work, we will use as main theorists Fox (2010), bringing his study on the young adult literature; Fajarrani (2013), who deals with the coming-of-age concept, together with Millard (2007) and Milchrahm (2023) who contributed to the construction of the theoretical referential, and connecting with Rìo (2022), in an analysis that discusses economic and power issues, and the interpersonal relationships of the characters, in addition to the lack of communication between young people, which leads to insecurities, anxiety, and vulnerability.

2 YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Young adult literature explores themes of power, identity, and differences. According to Fox (2010), young adults may deal with issues of low self-esteem, disordered eating, and suicide, and these issues may be explored. The author even mentions that young adult literature shows us examples of alternatives on how to deal with these oppressive issues, how we can understand and eradicate them.

During the Great Depression, which began in the United States around the 1930's, a large number of teenagers started to attend high school. At the time, there was an emergence of young culture in the classrooms, and an increase of young readers. “The Depression helped create a target audience for it as the dwindling job market drove young people out of the workplace and into the classroom in record numbers (Cart, 2016)”. In the past, there were only two groups of people in America: children and adults. Popular culture gave teenagers a voice, as the audience was growing and the books read by young people were considered books for adults, there was no designation for this type of literature. The term young adult gained a definition in the decade of 1950, when the American Library Association created the Young Adult Services Division, focusing more on young audiences.

There was a golden age for Young Adult Literature, when writers decided to write especially for teenagers. During the 1960's and 1970's, *The Outsiders*, by S. E.

² A pesquisa qualitativa preocupa-se, portanto, com aspectos da realidade que não podem ser quantificados, centrando-se na compreensão e explicação da dinâmica das relações sociais.

³ Os estudos descritivos exigem do pesquisador uma série de informações sobre o que se deseja pesquisar. O estudo descritivo pretende descrever "com exatidão" os fatos e fenômenos de determinada realidade.

Hilton, and *The Chocolate War*, by Robert Cormier, were published, having a great influence in the history of young adult literature, bringing various important themes and situations that were of the interest of the young audience. Until the 1990's, when there was a difficult period in young adult literature, but eventually in the middle of the decade, it became one of the most innovative areas of publishing, its popularity led to the creation of specific departments in bookstores.

In classrooms, young people feel more comfortable reading narratives they can identify with, rather than focusing on the classics. Contemporary literature becomes more accessible by being free from stereotypes surrounding the adult protagonists of ancient times, and bringing current news for its readers. An important issue is how the author will deal with their characters without mirroring in them situations that are disconnected from reality and its readers. "Like children's literature, young adult literature is traditionally defined by its audience, not its writers" (Coats, 2011, p. 323). In the 21st century, tools like the internet are frequently used to define the connections built between the characters. It is important to remember that teenagers who have access to this type of communication are different from teenagers from ten or fifteen years ago. That is one of the reasons some authors are used to create another universe, as J.K. Rowling did with *Harry Potter*, and others opt to create characters living in real life, dealing with the same reality as Sally Rooney did in her novels, as in *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*.

"Young adult literature inherently involves the recurrent theme of 'coming of age', an issue with which all young people must engage in on their road to adulthood" (Fox, 2010, p. 32). To the author, characters in young adult literature struggle with various issues in search of their own voice and identity. The choice of young adult literature among young people is often for pleasure. Due to this, it is clear that the consumption of these literary works is related to the personal identification of young people, whether due to the addressed theme or the way the characters deal with their issues. By addressing these issues, this type of literature interacts with the reality of young adults, as Bortoluzi (2022) explains:

YAL (Young Adult Literature) emerges, then, encompassing fiction and non-fiction, as well as all subgenres contained between these two categories. At its beginning (second half of the 20th century), it was predominantly characterized by fictional plots with more realistic themes relating to this specific audience, such as, for example, relationships, depression, alcohol, drugs, sexuality, racism, death, etc. (Bortoluzi, 2022, p. 57, our translation)⁴.

Young adult literature is a great place to explore and criticize several current issues, such as sexuality, identity, culture and, to Fox (2010, p. 46), "young adult literature has immense transformative potentials and possibilities for the reader of all ages [...], like the characters presented are trying to make sense of their own lives". It is extremely important to analyze young adult literature to understand how the reader can connect to the reality and perspectives of the characters. Authentic books, according to Fox, illustrate struggle and triumph that continue to serve as a reminder of the possibilities that can be explored in readers' lives and through the formation of

⁴ A LJA surge, então, abarcando ficção e não-ficção, bem como todos os subgêneros contidos entre essas duas categorias. Em seu início (segunda metade do século XX), ela caracterizou-se predominantemente por enredos ficcionais com temáticas mais realistas referentes a esse público específico, como, por exemplo, relacionamentos, depressão, álcool, drogas, sexualidade, racismo, morte, etc.

their identities. Furthermore, literature offers a better understanding of a person's life, as its sensitivity allows a connection between reality and fiction.

To Fox (2010), the reading act is safe because it is done independently, which means literature allows young people to find information in literary works that they would not have the initiative to search for elsewhere, like asking their parents. This makes the authors of these literary works, in a certain way, responsible for providing help through their characters and, according to Fox, the authors are constantly taking risks, as their stories can directly impact the lives and choices of young people. In the author's view, young readers may deal with complexities of the society they live in outside the books, and it is through exploring this complexity that they can hold on to the changes of identity and power structures through their reality.

2.1 Coming-of-age: the character (trans)formation

The coming-of-age within the narrative explores the transition process of a character as he or she grows up, from childhood or adolescence to adulthood, or as the character goes through a series of changes that will define his/her life, obstacles and events that make him/her have a better understanding of the world, which can make the reader identify.

The narrative events in coming-of-age novels move forward in time through a point of maturity. The narrative events revolving around the main character's teenage life also indicate that there is a journey to the stage of maturity (Fajarrani, 2013, p.6).

This coming-of-age process involves the social development of the characters, a process of cultural and identity construction. "Coming of age presents an opportunity to grow toward adulthood and gain certain power and privileges, while simultaneously losing certain power and privileges" (Fox, 2010, p.32).

According to Millard (2007, p. 4), "formative experiences can occur at any age, but in terms of literary genre the expression 'coming of age' is conventionally used of adolescence". To the author, reaching adulthood does not mean reaching maturity, even if the character has entered adulthood, it should not be assumed that he has found himself or his place in the world. This phenomenon in literature can characterize the journey between being a child full of dreams, naivety and hope, and a disillusioned protagonist, inexperienced and challenged by the new reality, who may or may not acquire good personal development. The focus of this genre happens as it shapes the reader's experience along with the narrative, bringing the reader closer and closer. Human connections, family love, grief, fear and insecurity: all of these elements reflect on the transition between adolescence and adulthood, as Vella (2013) points out:

The coming of age novel provides a vehicle for the discussion of identity and its surrounding issues. Through the movement from childhood to adulthood this genre allows a discussion of personal identity and selfhood and works as an allegory, or parallel imagining, of nationhood and national identity (Vella, 2013, p. 1).

Coming-of-age arises from the tradition of *Bildungsroman*, which originated in Germany, in the 18th century, linking Bildung (formation, development) and Roman (novel) and means a novel that tells the beginning of emotional development and moral education of the protagonist. *Bildungsroman*, to Millard (2007, p.2) "has been

widely adopted as a term in literary criticism to characterize the generic conventions of any novel of youthful development". This genre not only talks about the protagonist's trajectory, but also influences the development of the readers. Therefore, the novel presents a moral evolution and emphasizes the relationships between the characters as they grow.

A great example of this type of literature is *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë. Because of her stage of maturity, the main character brings a constant construction of her personality, starting as a young child and growing up as an independent woman. Though the book is set in the 1800s, its influence still impacts contemporary youth society. The experiences of Jane Eyre as a child living with her relatives and as a young woman having to work at that period brought her insecurities and we can see, as readers, how she discovers her first love, how he breaks her trust, and the reasons for her to be alone, even if this costs her the fortunes that the union with Mr Rochester could bring her. To Milchrahm (2023), the phenomenon that occurs in this genre is influenced by the personality of the characters, as well as by the society and environment in which they find themselves. These characters begin their journey of maturity with a state of ignorance and desire for something new. Meeting new people they can identify with, experiencing new situations and facing unimaginable challenges are possible elements that are found in these novels.

The example of Jane Eyre is constantly used as a demarcation of the audacious way in which she positions herself about the social expectations that surround her actions. Her story is empowering for the Victorian period, when women are silenced and inferior. Her trajectory is followed by how she faces adversity and anguish to the point where she reaches maturity. Reaching adulthood allows the character to understand where the difficulties came from, and how they can be faced. *Jane Eyre* is very popular to this day because it still portrays how the structure of the coming-of-age novels awakens in the reading public a perception of the character's learning and experiences, and how this can reflect in their personal lives.

Bildungsroman, therefore, concerns not only the learning of the protagonist in the narrative, but also to the formation and transformation of the public reader, who will be invited to a journey of self-knowledge from the hero's trajectory narrated (Vieira, 2022, p. 836).

The difference between the concepts is that the *Bildungsroman* is about psychological evolution, following the character from his youth to adulthood, while the coming-of-age refers to any story about growth, being a more encompassing term.

Contemporary coming of age stories can still be bildungsromans because they detail the process of identity formation in ways that are sometimes more complicated than classic or modern bildungsromans would allude to. Contemporary coming of age stories can be seen as a bildungsroman for a new generation that welcomes diversity and world readers (Villoria, 2013, p.3).

However, the purpose of the coming-of-age in this work is to understand which external elements impact the character's life and how this character deals with it. This process can be terrifying and, depending on how it is faced, it can be rewarding. The adolescence phase is characterized by internal conflicts, doubts, the search for identity and freedom. When analyzing a work marked by the coming-of-age process, we seek to understand where these elements come from, how we can work with them and how this type of literature impacts life.

Another important issue in contemporary coming-of-age novels is how young people go about communicating with each other. Communication tools took shape as they became integrated into 21st century novels, with the use of emails, text messages and video calls. This also characterizes the evolution of the genre, as understanding the moment in which the story is narrated is essential to understand why some things are happening. This way, the reader can relate that situation to a specific moment in the story. As Milchrahm (2023, p.70) points out, “the inclusion of tools of communication of the 21st century grants the novel authenticity, as it represents how adolescents are communicating in real life nowadays”.

Differently from *Jane Eyre*, *Normal People* is set in the 2000's, the independence and autonomy of the characters in Victorian Literature are more challenging to achieve. The coming-of-age novels are connected through time and place, so as readers, we can be anywhere in the world, at any time, these narratives can always be relatable. That is the reason why they are so popular, every human being goes through maturation. This is a common process for everyone to identify with. “Sally Rooney, in writing *Normal People*, proposes a different model, in which the great forming experience is the relationship between the protagonists” (Paz, 2023, p. 61, our translation)⁵. Thus, it will be possible to see the bond of these two individuals develop as they, individually, try to understand and deal with the world around them.

Throughout this work, we are going to see how these previous elements will help to create the evolution of the characters, bringing them both in this coming-of-age story, “Throughout the whole book, their growing up is presented in relation to each other, as their paths are always crossing and they influence each other on their way to adulthood” (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 58). It is possible to see the points of view of both protagonists, and the chapters alternate between one and the other. We will see about their adolescence and their adulthood, how they have changed and what are their fears, their thoughts and their truths. The book is constructed in two focalizers, two different perspectives, showing different stages in their lives.

Rooney presents the reader with characters who struggle to overcome the barriers to the entrance to adulthood and gets the reader emotionally involved in the several ups and downs they experience while coming-of-age (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 74).

Also, it is possible to see how the coming-of-age works for the reader. Marianne and Connell are both readers themselves, they use books to escape from reality, or because they feel close to it. This can bring the reader closer to the work, because they can identify with written stories and feel embraced by them.

For Marianne, reading highly regarded books functions as some sort of proof for her that she is indeed smarter than most of the people she meets, and reinforces her feeling that she is different, positioning her as the ‘other’ in contrast to society, which she does not feel she belongs to most of the time (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 74).

Finding comfort in a book is one of the possible characteristics of *coming-of-age* stories, as they show the construction of the characters and what they could become, showing their conflicts and personal growth. “For Connell, on the other hand, books are not only an escape mechanism, but also reflect his affinity with art and his inner

⁵ Sally Rooney, ao escrever *Pessoas normais*, propõe um modelo diverso, no qual a grande experiência formadora é a relação entre os protagonistas.

longing to become a writer himself" (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 74). This type of literature allows contemporary readers who are also maturing, recognize the references that mark the 21st century, such as the internet, films, books, slangs and immediate feelings, such as anxiety, depression, insecurity and fear.

3 NORMAL PEOPLE: AN (EXTRA)ORDINARY NOVEL

Normal People (2018), by Sally Rooney, is presented in contemporary Irish literature with its perspective of self-development and personal growth, bringing a chronological and psychological narrative, which takes place between 2011 and 2015, in the maturation process of the two protagonists, Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron, who engage in a novel narrated mostly in the present and by an omniscient narrator. Its writing brings a feeling of intimacy, the dialogues and thoughts avoid quotation marks and its scenes can cause discomfort in the reader, due to the structure of the work, considering that the characters are in a constant process of maturing and changing.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood may cause reflections in those who are experiencing it or seeing it from other perspectives. *Normal People* brings this sensation of chaos dominating the minds of young people as they try to understand their purpose in this world. Despite the development of a relationship between the protagonists, the book portrays the metamorphosis of these characters over the course of the chapters, where the sense of belonging is increasingly desired. Marianne Sheridan, who was hurt and formed by her past, sees her future as a blank page, a new chance to write her own journey. While Connell Waldron was satisfied with his popularity, he found himself completely lost and disconnected from the new reality in Dublin.

Rooney focuses on working through the years of adolescence, when the characters are still at school, and the beginning of adulthood, when they start university. Milchrahm (2023), points out that *Normal People* is focused on:

[...] the protagonists' adolescent years, interspersed with memories of their childhood, represent a critical phase full of decisions and character formation, building up to the full transition to adulthood, which is signified by an end to the restlessness of searching for one's identity (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 13).

According to Paz (2023), the development of the hero is formed through daily transformative experiences for the formation of the character's identity. These experiences, involving social life, the character's personality and the setting they are in, are fundamental for the maturation of ideals, goals and worldview. In this way, the coming-of-age process acts on the characters in *Normal People* so that the reader can access their thoughts and understand their frustrations. To better understand this process in the characters, it is necessary to analyze how they deal with the situations imposed in their lives and how they are formed according to these situations.

3.1 Identity and socioeconomic class in *Normal People*, by Sally Rooney

Sally Rooney was born in Castlebar, Ireland, in 1991. Being part of the millennial generation, always interested in politics and influenced by the impact on Ireland's economy, her first published works, including *Normal People*, carry aspects of identity, class inequality and intimacy. Rooney graduated from Trinity College with a degree in English literature.

Ideologically, Sally Rooney is a feminist and a confessed Marxist, and her political consciousness pervades her work as much as the precariousness of her characters' lives. She has often complained about the impact of Post-Celtic crisis in Irish society, and how it hinders young people in their search for independence, an issue she knows all too well from personal experience (Rio, 2022, p. 177).

After a period of economic boom, between 1990 and 2000, known as the Celtic Tiger, the Republic of Ireland went through a period of recession that impacted the country's economy in several negative ways. According to Zarenczanski (2013), in the mid-1990s "Irish unemployment improved dramatically, rising from approximately 14% in 1983 to 4.2% in 2000", and during this period, Ireland was receiving a lot of investment from abroad, with several companies wanting to set up shop in the country.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the economy continued to grow, however, in 2007, prices in the real estate market decreased and, as a result, demand also decreased, causing a series of unemployment in the country. As the government had become dependent on this market, it went into crisis due to having more fiscal deficits. As a result, it cut some investments, reduced employee salaries and increased income taxes. The recession that occurred was, in large part, caused by decisions taken by the upper class, shortly after Ireland had managed to grow in a way that had never happened in the European Union. The increase in prices in Dublin meant that the population had to pay more taxes and many properties fell into disrepair.

The work analyzed takes place exactly after this economic boom and this moment not only shapes the characters' decisions, but also influences academic and social issues, as the characters need to learn to deal with social conventions and find their place in the world. The author uses different perspectives from both protagonists, insert political discussions, communication tools and suggest a space to connect with modern-day readers.

Through the usage of this variety of literary tools and the adaption of both discourse and story level to their respective socio-political contexts, Rooney suggests how coming-of-age stories can be presented in a new, contemporary way, while still basing her novels on the most fundamental characteristics of the Bildungsroman (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 117).

Just like the author's life, the work is set in the millennial generation. That is, its issues impact young adults in contemporary society. For this reason, the millennial readers become attached to the work, to the characters, and may realize that, as long as there is resilience and hope, at some point they will reach the necessary point of maturity so that they can find themselves. "By connecting with characters that are facing similar situations, teenagers can find solace in the act of reading" (Fox, 2010, p. 16). This maturity occurs through the coming-of-age process, which explores the complexities and changes that occurred in the characters' lives, the challenges and experiences they went through to reach adulthood and be able to better deal with their issues.

Economic issues can also be found in coming-of-age novels, such as *Normal People*, implying that the obstacles encountered during the characters' maturation journey occur through a capitalist society. Thus, as Milchrahm (2023) points out:

The novel portrays the disparity in social standing between the two protagonists as a power struggle, which complicates their ultimate goal of finally coming-of-age by accepting who they are and embracing the love they feel for each other (Milchrahm 2023, p. 64).

Thereby, we see that capital is discreetly treated in *Normal People*, with Connell being evidently poorer than Marianne, but the subject does not come up, causing them to live in a parallel reality, and coexist as if this doesn't have to be an issue between them. However, when analyzing the dialogues between the two of them, it is clear that he struggles with this inferiority he feels in relation to Marianne. Throughout the story, Connell finds himself rejected and humiliated, whether due to his financial conditions or the pressure from society to be the perfect man. In *Normal People*, questions of identity are constantly present, and as Woodward (2014) discusses, identity is marked through the occasions in which we find ourselves. With the modern world and contemporary life, identity also changes, considering consumption patterns and cultural factors and how we behave through them.

Global changes and transformations in political and economic structures in the contemporary world highlight issues of identity and struggles for the affirmation and maintenance of national and ethical identities (Woodward, 2014, p. 25, our translation)⁶.

Marianne is constantly questioning her identity. Her being raised in an abusive house made her mind create an unsettling insight into who she really was, making her think she was not special or deserving of love. "I don't know what's wrong with me, says Marianne. I don't know why I can't be like normal people. (...) I don't know why I can't make people love me. I think there was something wrong with me when I was born" (Rooney, 2018, p. 139). Although she has confusing thoughts about herself, she knows exactly what she wants to do, while Connell is still struggling between studying to become someone stable or doing something he likes. He does not know what path he should take, so Marianne helps him to choose to study English in Trinity College. Connell feels like himself with the presence of Marianne. Despite being beloved and popular around his friends, Connell has his own interests, things that his friends would never comprehend, like reading. This is something that connects him to Marianne, and it is conflicting how he fits into this group of friends so different from him. Most of the time, he wears a mask to hide who he really would like to be, as the thought of becoming like one of his friends bothers him. So when they are alone, just the two of them, Connell allows himself to act like his normal personality, the one no one had ever met.

Therefore, identity is marked by difference. In social relations, divisions are established based on classificatory systems. These systems determine opposing groups that form social life, and if we classify the protagonists' relationship, we realize that Connell longs for a better life to be good enough for Marianne. At the beginning of the story, he represents a certain social reference among his friends, even though they have different backgrounds. From the moment he moves to the big city, he is faced with a harsher reality, where the standard of capitalist society forces the characters to mature.

⁶ As mudanças e transformações globais nas estruturas políticas e econômicas no mundo contemporâneo colocam em relevo as questões de identidade e as lutas pela afirmação e manutenção das identidades nacionais e éticas.

On the other hand, at a certain point in their existential experience the oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressors and their way of life. Sharing this way of life becomes an overpowering aspiration. In their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the middle-class oppressed, who yearn to be equal to the “eminent” men and women of the upper class. (Freire, 1968, p. 62).

The entire context of contemporary Ireland is surrounded by elements connecting the author and her characters. “Sally Rooney’s novels portray a young generation framed by symbolic identity markers that intertwine and situate them in a permanent state of liminality that encompasses tensions and conflict” (Rio, 2022). Thus, identity and social class are presented in interconnected ways in her work.

“Their personal development and approaching of adulthood is reflected in the main characters’ moving to Dublin, taking a step towards independence by loosening the strings to old friends and detaching from their families” (Milchrahm, 2023, p.67). While Marianne lives comfortably in her place in Dublin, Connell finds himself in a difficult situation, where he has no more place to live. The relationship between him and Marianne is going really well, but the bother of having to ask her to live together while he cannot find another job is torturous. “It felt too much like asking her for money. He and Marianne never talked about money (...). He hated having to think about things like that. He knew Marianne never thought that way” (Rooney, 2018, p. 97). Although the book does not clearly detail these differences, Connell’s discomfort in needing money while Marianne does not think about this concern is notable. “The reader finds in Connell a young man deeply troubled by material wealth [...]” (Rio, 2022).

When they travel together to Vienna, to Marianne’s holiday house, Connell realizes that she is richer than he thought, and he is only able to travel now because of the scholarship. Marianne also has accomplished the scholarship, but “for her the scholarship was a self-esteem boost, a happy confirmation of what she has always believed about herself...” (Rooney, 2018, p. 124). For Connell, “the scholarship is a gigantic material fact (...) 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” (Rooney, 2018, p. 124). We can observe the difference between the necessity of him having stability and the feeling of accomplishing something for her intellectual validation. The first time they have a proper conversation about money, Marianne apologizes for being ignorant about this subject, because she does not think about it much, and Connell admits he feels weird about this.

Connell’s questions of identity are very present from the beginning of the book to the days he went to Trinity College. Having a misunderstood image of himself, he strives to fit in Marianne’s group, to the point of falling into a state of identity crisis. He does not feel like he belongs, as he felt in his old social circle. Consequently, his panic at being in an unfamiliar environment and the tragic loss of his high school friend cause him to fall into a state of depression. Even his admirable intelligence is silenced by himself inside and outside the academic environment, given the coexistence with the people around him.

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 (Luying, 2023).

Connell's silence is formed by his lack of confidence, due to the new environment he is in now. Living with people different from his background makes the character feel increasingly outside of this universe. In some passages, we see how much he misses his hometown, not only for the environment itself, but also for the sensations he had at that moment in his life. Becoming friends with other students suddenly is not as simple as it was before, and the feeling of being the poor countryside boy involves his insecurities and makes him an antisocial, anxious and depressed person.

3.2 Marianne Sheridan: the abnormal heroin

At the beginning, Marianne can be described as a very complex female character. She has great intelligence, has no friends, and is not liked by anyone. Coming from a wealthy family, being an argumentative person, Marianne does not take advantage of her social condition to show herself superior to anyone. Her traits do not make her a popular person, and she is aware that people disapprove of her behavior. Marianne does not even react to the aggression done to her, both at school and at home. Her childhood was not a happy one and she confesses to Connell that her father hit her. "Marianne's traumatic and violent experiences with her family inform her present development as her memory often reminds her of her supposed unlovable character" (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 66). Her attitudes give the image that she is a closed, hostile person. However, Connell begins to get to know her better, and realizes that she lives in a toxic environment, with an abusive brother, an absent mother, and a dead father who never gave her love. This kind of abuse portrayed in books like *Normal People* is something that not only the character faces. Marianne suffered bullying, harassment, slut shaming and her experiences are not only hers, but also the readers'. She is thrown into adulthood after a series of these traumatic events, longing for a life where she would not be known as her teenage self.

Her adolescence was lonely, until she became closer to Connell. However, their relationship is secret, at his request, and Marianne accepts without complaining. This attitude demonstrates how normalized it is for Marianne for those around her to behave in an abusive manner. When she goes to Dublin, Marianne becomes popular and makes new friends, and finally breaks free from the restraints of her home. However, whenever she returns to her hometown, Carricklea, she is faced with the violence she suffered at home, by her brother, Alan, and the sexism of her mother, who allowed Alan to act the way he wanted, and did not stop him. On one of the occasions when Marianne returns home, she is physically assaulted by her brother and is rescued by Connell, who protects her: "Everything is going to be alright, he says. Trust me. I love you, I'm not going to let anything like that happen to you again" (Rooney, 2018, p. 188). Since then, her mother, who was already distant, refuses to speak to her, and Marianne never returns home again. Marianne uses the defense mechanism she is familiar with, and in all her relationships after Connell, she is submissive and humiliated, because she thinks she is a bad person and deserves it: "Maybe I want to be treated badly, she says. I don't know. Sometimes I think I deserve bad things because I'm a bad person" (Rooney, 2018, p.105).

Her relationships show how normal it is for her to feel submissive. She grew up with this trauma, and turned it into her way of dealing with the world. In one of her relationships, she submits to uncomfortable situations. Lukas, her boyfriend in

Sweden, usually plays a kind of sexual game with her, but Marianne, at a certain point, imposes herself, ordering him to stop what he is doing and release her, otherwise she would call the police.

She opens the door of the apartment and makes her way down the staircase. Could he really do the gruesome things he does to her and believe at the same time that he's acting out of love? Is the world such an evil place, that love should be indistinguishable from the basest and most abusive forms of violence? (Rooney, 2018, p. 150).

In her relationship with Jamie, a college friend, she also subjected herself to sexual games, to the point of being strangled and beaten with a belt. She believed that she liked it, but soon realized that there was no point in submitting to it. There is a way to experience love without being humiliated and without playing games, and Connell was the only person who made her feel really loved, because he never felt good about playing that kind of games. "I didn't need to play any game with you, she says. It was real. With Jamie it's like I'm acting a part, I just pretend to feel that way, like I'm in his power" (Rooney, 2018, p. 106).

In general, the novel shows traces of the traditional Bildungsroman as women are depicted as the 'weaker sex'. It is still men who sexually assault them and enact their power over them, which at the same time is represented as being part of the coming-of-age process (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 87).

The relationship between her and Connell goes back and forth, and is approached in a way that can be uncomfortable for the reader, given that they have a lot of miscommunication. "Lack of dialogue and unfinished sentences serve to represent their vulnerability and fragility" (Rio, 2021). After all, the fear of expressing themselves, of seeming fragile or too sentimental ends up taking away the possibilities of a serious relationship, with respect and real communication. However, after a few attempts, they reach a stage of maturity that allows them to talk, open up, and allow themselves to do some good to each other. Marianne notices her influence on Connell's life, on how participating in his life made him evolve. She helped him to see his talent for writing, choose his course, understand his efforts and deserve his academic gains. Furthermore, she taught him to love truly, to be patient, to accept and to improve as a man.

All these years they've been like two little plants sharing the same plot of soil, growing around one another, contorting to make room, taking certain unlikely positions. But in the end she has done something for him, she made a new life possible, and she can always feel good about that (Rooney, 2018, p.198).

During her exchange to Sweden, Marianne and Connell keep in touch via emails and skype. Her presence, even online, helps him get through difficult times as he battles depression. This leads us to consider the importance of technological tools at this moment, and contemporary coming-of-age books usually show us the frequent use of social media, facilitating the characters' communication. With Connell's move to New York, and their (for now) definitive separation, Marianne understands he has made her a better person. Life now will bring her new opportunities, and maybe a new partner. But no one could take from her what he gave her, nor the other way around. Her traumas, her experiences and situations made her who she is, to believe in herself and allow herself to live with aspirations, without strings attached, and to walk paths guided by her own will.

3.3 Connell Waldron: the figure of an outsider

Coming from a different background to Marianne, Connell is popular, from lower-middle class, beloved by the whole school and very intelligent. Despite being physically handsome, a great student and very sociable, his future is unknown and going to college also means giving up the embrace of the life he already knows. In addition to being financially a long shot. Lorraine, his mother, raised him alone, became pregnant as a teenager and despite the difficulties, managed to offer a sufficiently comfortable life for him. About his family, we are presented with the history of an uncle who was arrested and an unknown father.

Being a teenager is difficult. Taking on adult problems with regards to basic survival due to lack of socioeconomic resources can, in fact, be insurmountable. The reality and the message sent in these novels seems to be that while it is often hard or even impossible to “pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps,” it may be much more possible to do so if someone else is tugging on them as well, or holding one up, providing balance and support during the struggle (Darragh and Hill, 2014, p. 78).

When he moves to Dublin, his worries increase. Now as a lonely adult, Connell is faced with the problems of living in a big city through the few part-time jobs he gets and scholarships. Despite continuing his academic career, he finds himself lost in an environment where he feels uncomfortable and unable to integrate. “Throughout his coming-of-age, Connell has to deal with the unfairness of the economic system. At school in Carricklea, he can make up for his low social standing by his good looks and generally likeable character” (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 60).

In his hometown, Carricklea, he felt like he belonged. Everyone liked him, the family environment was a kind of comfort to overcome his internal insecurities. During high school, he was the center forward on the football team. He was loved among his friends and desired by the most popular and beautiful girl in school. To maintain his position as the popular boy, he often silently listened to his friends bullying Marianne, kept their relationship secret and asked another girl to the prom. We see in Connell a character driven by the influence of a certain group in which he does not identify, but during his maturation process, he masks these events, so that he does not lose the friends he has.

Connell Waldron can be identified as someone who appears to have a solid position in the society of his native Carricklea, although this masks his inner insecurity—mostly caused by his inferiority complex due to his family background and his class— that surfaces when he has to make decisions about his conduct (Contreras, 2022, p.9).

However, he realizes, years later, that by choosing to prioritize this part of his life, he left out a possibility with Marianne, the person with whom he feels like himself, when they are alone. “I think I did learn from it. And hopefully I have changed, you know, as a person. But honestly, if I have, it’s because of you” (Rooney, 2018, p. 74).

His attitudes as a teenager present us a boy who is unsure of himself, who does not know how to communicate and does not understand his feelings. Because he feels like an outsider both in the city and at the university, Connell still suffers from not dealing well with his emotions. The accumulation of these internal confusions begins long before his breakdown, when his friend Rob dies. This leads him to experience a state of depression, having panic and anxiety attacks, leading to the

search for psychological services. These thematics are so important to contemporary readers, because it can be very relatable these days, as Rio (2022, p. 78) suggests:

Normal People portrays a young generation, the millennials, struggling and at a loss. Through silence and miscommunication, it represents the problematic articulation of identity formation in contemporary societies and illuminates dramatic gender and class issues.

Between back and forth with Marianne, living with her social circle and the search for understanding his identity, Connell faces some uncomfortable episodes. In this way, he avoids some situations involving Marianne, such as showing signs of affection towards her in public. Furthermore, he is always feeling inferior and judged by his social class, attending parties and meetings and feeling frustrated by comments disguised as curiosity made by Marianne's friends.

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 (Luying, 2023, p.324).

During his journey, Connell managed to get involved with another girl after Marianne. In his relationship with Helen, a medical student, he finally felt balanced, as she belonged to the same social class as him. As Luying (2023, p. 325) points out:

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”.

He felt comfortable telling her he loved her, texting and video calling her, and introducing her to his friends and family. This is because Helen offers him a compatible relationship, sees something good in him, and gives him the self-confidence to express himself.

Helen has given Connell a new way to live. It's as if an impossibly heavy lid has been lifted off his emotional life and suddenly he can breathe fresh air. It is physically possible to type and send a message reading: "I love you" It had never seemed possible before, not remotely, but in fact it's easy (Rooney, 2018, p. 121).

However, their relationship degraded as he noticed that Helen and Marianne did not get along. As much as Connell didn't feel comfortable living with Marianne's circle of friends, he still considered her a friend, and did not like Helen's acidic comments towards Marianne. Therefore, throughout the chapters, we can see a new side to Helen, which Connell would not be able to tolerate. “Here, she's my friend, alright? Don't be talking about her like that” (Rooney, 2018, p. 130).

Because of his difficulty in adapting and understanding his emotions, he had the support of Marianne and the appropriate psychological treatment, thus, he gained more confidence, got a job as an editor and applied to a writing program in a university in New York, despite not thinking he would be accepted. But his dream would be fulfilled, he would become a writer. “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” (Luying, 2023, p. 325). As much as

he knew that this could be the end of their relationship with Marianne, she gave him the necessary support so that he could go and fit somewhere, in search of his identity, finally giving himself a chance.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Young readers, when receiving a contemporary book, expect to find something familiar. *Normal People* portrays what many people are facing, whether financially, mentally or even physically. By working with coming-of-age, we expect to find several elements that are part of the transition from a young person's life to adulthood. The book brought more than a love story between two young people, there is a truth in its own title: despite being about normal people, its protagonists are ordinary, in fact, but eccentric in their own way. Its predictable events, expected plots and intimacy with the reader show that the book has the power to welcome, embrace and teach whoever is reading it, especially those who are going through the maturation process.

Young adult literature can have an impact on the identity and formation of readers, especially those who are struggling with the same problems, as literature makes us reflect, and is a safe space where we can support each other, as Fox (2010, p.46) points out: "Powerful connections with characters in literature can serve to make the tumultuous transition into adulthood less abrasive as well as provide a context to begin understanding the current location of young adulthood".

Although over the years Connell and Marianne have gotten involved with other people, we see their growth separately and together, from high school to college. "The protagonists' journey happens through their relationships. Marianne and Connell develop when they are together, but also when they are with different partners" (Paz, 2023, p. 69, our translation)⁷. Their relations and daily situations were what shaped their maturation process.

Marianne and Connell are represented until they finally seem to be able to align their inner predispositions with their outside world, bringing their coming-of-age process to an end (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 58). They have finally reached the stage of maturity necessary to forgive themselves, prioritize themselves, and understand their purpose in the world. As he leaves, when everything is finally back on track between the two of them, she wonders if all the pain of missing him and being lonely would be worth it, and decides that any pain she feels would be less than what she has ever felt before. Thanks to Marianne, today he is a completely different person. And Connell also played a part in her maturation. He would not go if it were not for her, and she would not let him stay, knowing what awaits him there. "You should go, she says. I'll always be here. You know that (Rooney, 2018, p. 198)".

Finally, the protagonists go through a (trans)formation, leaving an open door for what might happen next. "This end presents a fundamental point for the proposal of formation by Sally Rooney: in the 21st century, to be formed is to be open to others to understand your own individuality and face constant changes" (Paz, 2023, p. 71, our translation)⁸.

⁷ A jornada dos protagonistas acontece através das suas relações. Marianne e Connell desenvolvem-se quando estão juntos, mas também nos momentos em que estão com diferentes parceiros.

⁸ Esse fim apresenta um ponto fundamental para a proposta de formação de Sally Rooney: no século XXI, formar-se é estar aberto ao outro para compreender a própria individualidade e enfrentar constantes mudanças.

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Ser professora nunca foi o meu maior sonho. Até que um dia, conheci os maiores. É fácil encontrar o seu futuro quando existe a chance de juntar a língua que você mais gosta de aprender e o ato de ensinar. Viajar o mundo, descobrir culturas, todos os sonhos conhecidos por milhares de jovens que só querem descobrir o seu lugar no mundo. Aos 17 anos fui à Irlanda graças a um projeto coordenado pela minha, então, professora de inglês. Na pandemia, aos 19 anos, conheci Pessoas Normais. Talvez por uma coincidência, essa obra contemporânea irlandesa me chamou atenção, e então eu soube que, um dia, Connell e Marianne se tornariam algo a mais na minha vida. Ter estado nos mesmos lugares que eles, conhecer a ambientação, entender o background dos personagens, tudo me fez amar ainda mais o poder da literatura. Agradeço ao meu orientador, Giovane, por ter acreditado que isso poderia se tornar um TCC de verdade, e não apenas algo que eu gostaria de falar sobre. Todos os professores que passaram pela minha vida deixaram um pouco de si, e eu sou grata a cada um deles.

“Aqueles que passam por nós, não vão sós, não nos deixam sós. Deixam um pouco de si, levam um pouco de nós - Antoine de Saint-Exupéry”. (que por sinal, o Pequeno Príncipe foi o meu primeiro livro de verdade!!! Obrigada mamãe por me presentear com ele e me incentivar a ler, até mesmo desde quando eram apenas os seus gibis do Zé Carioca dos anos 80).