

## The Evolution of Friendship and Solidarity in Contemporary Fiction Set During Crisis (Normal People and Conversations with Friends by Sally Rooney)

Sham Abdullah Rakaf

Lecturer and researcher in the Department of Languages and Translation at the University of Tabuk, Kingdom of Saudia Arabia

Email: [salrakf@ut.edu.sa](mailto:salrakf@ut.edu.sa)

### Abstract:

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This paper examines the evolution of friendship and solidarity in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018). Through comparative textual analysis, it investigates how representations of intimate relationships develop across the two novels, from the fluid and often volatile negotiations of early adulthood to a more sustained and adaptive form of interdependence. Drawing on care ethics (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993) and vulnerability theory (Butler, 2004), the study argues that Rooney portrays friendship not as effortless emotional support but as an ethical practice requiring attentiveness, responsibility, and the acceptance of mutual dependence. In *Conversations with Friends*, relationships are characterised by overlapping entanglements, power imbalances, and emotional withholding. In *Normal People*, these dynamics mature into a quieter, temporally extended form of relational autonomy, in which characters learn to negotiate class differences and personal vulnerability through repeated acts of recommitment.

By offering a sustained comparative reading grounded in feminist theory, this paper addresses a gap in existing scholarship, which has tended to analyse the novels separately or through isolated thematic lenses. It demonstrates that Rooney's early fiction reconfigures solidarity as the everyday labour of living with shared fragility under neoliberal conditions. The study contributes to broader discussions in contemporary literary studies concerning the role of the novel in articulating ethical responses to personal and social precarity.

**Keywords:** Sally Rooney, friendship, solidarity, care ethics, vulnerability theory, contemporary Irish fiction, neoliberalism

## 1. Introduction:

In an era defined by economic uncertainty, digital isolation, mental health struggles, class disparity, and relational fragility, contemporary English-language fiction has turned increasingly toward the themes of friendship and solidarity (Butler, 2004; Tronto, 1993). These bonds, once often treated as secondary to romantic individualism, now appear as essential lifelines that help characters navigate personal and collective crises. Sally Rooney has emerged as a distinctive voice in this landscape, capturing these dynamics with acuity in her first two novels, *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018). Both works, set against the backdrop of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland and the intimate upheavals of young adulthood, portray friendship not as a static background but as an evolving force that shape's identity, exposes vulnerability, and fosters tentative forms of solidarity (Barros-Del Río, 2022; Carregal-Romero, 2023).

Rooney's novels unfold in a world where traditional structures family, stable community, and secure employment frequently falter, compelling individuals to build connections through halting conversations, shared silences, and the quiet effort of mutual understanding. In *Conversations with Friends*, the intense and fluctuating bond between Frances and her best friend (and former lover) Bobbi forms the emotional core, complicated by their involvement with the older married couple Melissa and Nick. Here, friendship intertwines with desire, jealousy, and intellectual exchange, revealing how personal crises such as illness, infidelity, and artistic ambition test loyalty while deepening interdependence. Frances's detached narration highlights the complex "texture of millennial friendship," where both digital messages and face-to-face encounters become sites of miscommunication and gradual revelation. Scholars have identified this relationship as the novel's central "interpersonal crux," where power dynamics and emotional needs constantly shift (Utter, 2021).

*Normal People* develop this exploration further through the long-term, on-again, off-again connection between Connell and Marianne. Their relationship, shaped by class differences, social misalignment, and profound emotional intimacy, serves as both romance and friendship in its truest sense. Amid personal crises including Connell's anxiety and depression, Marianne's history of familial abuse, and the broader alienation of university life—the pair repeatedly discover in each other a rare space of acceptance and growth. Connell gradually recognises how Marianne has helped him become a better person, illustrating solidarity as a mutual project of becoming that resists the isolating pressures of contemporary life.

This study examines the evolution of friendship and solidarity across these two novels as a way of understanding wider shifts in contemporary fiction set during moments of crisis. While *Conversations*

with *Friends* foregrounds the messy, polyphonic dynamics of chosen family among young creatives, *Normal People* trace a more longitudinal arc, showing how early bonds endure and adapt through repeated separations and reconciliations. Together, the novels move from the precarious entanglements of early twenties experimentation toward a more tempered, resilient solidarity rooted in shared fragility.

By analysing narrative techniques, character development, and thematic patterns in Rooney's early work, this paper argues that her fiction reimagines solidarity not as grand ideological commitment but as the everyday labour of listening, misstopping, and returning. In doing so, the novels present a humane vision for navigating overlapping crises through ordinary, imperfect connection.

## 2. Literature Review

Study on Sally Rooney's early fiction has rapidly established her as a key chronicler of optimistic experience in post-recession Ireland, with particular attention to the ways her novels interrogate relational practices under neoliberal conditions. Both *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018) shift the focus from traditional romantic individualism toward more complex explorations of friendship, vulnerability, and interdependence, yet they diverge in emphasis and theoretical framing.

A prominent strand of criticism centres on female friendship as a central relational structure. Utter (2021) positions the bond between Frances and Bobbi in *Conversations with Friends* as the novel's "interpersonal crux," arguing that their friendship marked by former romantic attachment, intellectual exchange, and fluctuating power dynamics serves as the primary site where emotional labour and loyalty are negotiated. This reading aligns with broader feminist approaches that link Rooney's work to earlier explorations of female friendship. However, while Utter emphasises the disruptive potential of non-normative friendship, Carregal-Romero (2023) adopts a more ethically oriented lens, drawing on care ethics and vulnerability theory to examine how Frances's initial emotional detachment gives way to reciprocal openness. For Carregal-Romero, the novel critiques neoliberal subjectivities that render vulnerability an "unspeakable injury."

In *Normal People*, study has concentrated more explicitly on class, communication failures, and the long-term development of relational autonomy. Barros-Del Río (2022) reads the novel as a millennial *Bildungsroman* set in recessionary Ireland, where Connell and Marianne's on-and-off connection exposes the damaging effects of individuation and material precarity on identity formation. Class differences and social misalignments repeatedly strain their bond, yet these tensions ultimately foster growth. Carregal-Romero (2023) extends this analysis across both novels, contending that Rooney

consistently portrays vulnerability not as personal weakness but as the necessary foundation for ethical care.

These studies converge on the idea that Rooney's characters resist neoliberal ideals of self-sufficiency through practices of mutual dependence. Nevertheless, a noticeable gap remains. Existing scholarship tends to treat the two novels separately or focus on one dominant theme whether female friendship, class dynamics, or vulnerability without sustained comparative attention to how representations of friendship and solidarity themselves evolve from the experimental entanglements of *Conversations with Friends* to the more tempered, longitudinal solidarity depicted in *Normal People*. Moreover, few studies integrate care ethics and vulnerability theory with close analysis of narrative techniques and class consciousness across Rooney's diptych.

This paper addresses that gap by offering a comparative examination of the maturation of friendship and solidarity across the two novels. It positions Rooney's early work as a subtle yet significant intervention in contemporary fiction.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated feminist theoretical frameworks—care ethics, vulnerability theory, and relational autonomy—that together illuminate how friendship and solidarity function as ethical practices in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018).

Care ethics emerged as a distinct moral framework in the early 1980s, primarily through Carol Gilligan's critique of justice-based models of moral development. Gilligan (1982) identified a "different voice" that emphasises responsiveness, attentiveness, and the maintenance of relationships rather than abstract principles of rights and fairness. Joan Tronto (1993) further developed care ethics into a political and social theory, defining care as a multi-phased practice involving attentiveness to needs, assumption of responsibility, competent care-giving, and responsiveness to the care-receiver.

Vulnerability theory, as articulated by Judith Butler, complements care ethics by reframing vulnerability not as individual weakness or failure but as a fundamental ontological condition of human life. Butler (2004) argues that all bodies are precarious and exposed to injury, loss, and dependence on others. In neoliberal contexts, however, vulnerability is frequently disavowed or pathologised as a threat to self-sufficiency.

Relational autonomy provides a further conceptual bridge. Feminist philosophers such as Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) argue that autonomy is not achieved through radical independence but is constituted and sustained through social relationships.

Applied to Rooney's novels, these frameworks reveal how characters confront the tension between neoliberal demands for self-sufficiency and the reality of human fragility. In *Conversations with Friends*, Frances's emotional detachment and the fluctuating friendship with Bobbi illustrate the difficulty of acknowledging vulnerability. In *Normal People*, Connell and Marianne's evolving bond demonstrates a gradual movement toward relational autonomy, as they learn to accept dependence and offer care across class and emotional divides.

#### 4. Textual Analysis

Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018) trace the shifting dynamics of intimate relationships through moments of emotional withholding, miscommunication, and gradual acknowledgment of mutual need.

In *Conversations with Friends*, the bond between Frances and Bobbi operates as the novel's central relational axis, complicated by their entanglement with Melissa and Nick. Frances's first-person narration reveals a characteristic emotional restraint. Early in the novel, she observes her own patterns of detachment, noting how she underestimates her own power in relationships "so [she doesn't] have to blame [herself] for treating other people badly" (Rooney, 2017, p. 367). When Frances's endometriosis flares and her affair with Nick strains her friendship with Bobbi, the text shows the labour required to sustain closeness. Their reconciliation scenes, marked by halting conversations, demonstrate the practice of attentiveness and responsibility central to care ethics (Tronto, 1993). As Utter (2021) observes, the friendship functions as an "interpersonal crux" where jealousy and intellectual intimacy test loyalty.

*Normal People* extends this inquiry across a longer temporal arc, focusing on the evolving connection between Connell and Marianne. A key passage captures their mutual shaping near the novel's close: "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" (Rooney, 2018, p. 265). This organic metaphor underscores relational autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). Marianne's internal reflection further crystallises this shift: "No one can be independent of other people completely, so why not give up the attempt... depend on people for everything, allow them to depend on you" (Rooney, 2018, p. 266). Such realisations emerge from concrete crises—Connell's episodes of anxiety and depression, Marianne's isolation at university; where silence gives way to tentative recommitment.

Comparing the two novels reveals a clear development. *Conversations with Friends* foregrounds the chaotic negotiations of early adulthood, where relationships overlap and boundaries remain fluid.

*Normal People* shows these patterns maturing into a more sustained form of mutual shaping. Rooney's restrained prose style refuses easy catharsis, instead highlighting small acts of return and recognition.

Anchored in care ethics and vulnerability theory (Butler, 2004; Carregal-Romero, 2023), these moments illustrate how characters move from strategies of emotional self-protection toward a quieter acceptance of shared need.

## 5. Discussion:

The comparative analysis of Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018) reveals a clear maturation in the representation of intimate relationships. Moving from the fluid, overlapping negotiations of early adulthood in the former to the more sustained, temporally extended bond in the latter, Rooney depicts friendship as an evolving ethical practice shaped by class tensions, communication failures, and the gradual acceptance of mutual need.

This finding extends existing scholarship in several respects. While Utter (2021) usefully identifies female friendship as the “interpersonal crux” in *Conversations with Friends*, and Barros-Del Río (2022) situates *Normal People* within the tradition of the millennial novel of formation amid recessionary Ireland, these studies tend to treat the novels in relative isolation. Carregal-Romero (2023) comes closest to a joint reading by applying care ethics and vulnerability theory across both texts, yet stops short of tracing the longitudinal development of relational practices. By offering a sustained comparative examination grounded in care ethics (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993), vulnerability theory (Butler, 2004), and relational autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000), the present study bridges these approaches.

A key contribution lies in showing that solidarity in Rooney's early fiction emerges less as ideological resistance and more as the accumulated result of everyday ethical labour. This nuanced portrayal challenges neoliberal constructions of autonomy while avoiding romanticised notions of perfect harmony. The textual evidence from Frances's self-reflective detachment to the organic metaphor of Connell and Marianne “growing around one another” (Rooney, 2018, p. 265) illustrates how vulnerability, once disavowed as an “unspeakable injury” (Carregal-Romero, 2023), becomes the foundation for relational growth.

Theoretically, the analysis reinforces the value of integrating care ethics with vulnerability theory in contemporary literary studies. Future research could productively extend this comparative method to Rooney's later novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) or to other contemporary writers exploring relational ethics under conditions of precarity.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the evolution of friendship and solidarity in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018). Its central aim was to trace how representations of intimate relationships develop across the two novels, moving from experimental and often volatile negotiations in the former to a more sustained and adaptive form of mutual shaping in the latter.

The analysis demonstrates that Rooney portrays friendship not as effortless emotional support but as an ethical practice grounded in attentiveness, responsibility, and the acceptance of vulnerability. Drawing on care ethics (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993), vulnerability theory (Butler, 2004), and relational autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000), the study shows how characters in both novels gradually shift from strategies of emotional self-protection toward practices of recommitment and interdependence. Key moments such as Frances's reconciliation with Bobbi and the organic metaphor of Connell and Marianne "growing around one another" (Rooney, 2018, p. 265) illustrate that solidarity emerges through small, repeated acts of negotiation rather than grand ideological commitment.

By offering a sustained comparative reading of the two novels, this study extends existing scholarship, which has largely examined the texts separately or through singular thematic lenses (Utter, 2021; Barros-Del Río, 2022; Carregal-Romero, 2023). It contributes a more nuanced understanding of how Rooney's fiction reconfigures relational ethics under neoliberal conditions.

Ultimately, the study suggests that contemporary literature continues to serve as a vital space for exploring humane responses to personal and societal crisis. Rooney's early novels affirm that imperfect human connections, forged through miscommunication and return, remain one of the most significant resources available in an age of increasing precarity.

## 7. Recommendations

This study's examination of friendship and solidarity in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* opens several promising avenues for further research and application. Future research could productively extend the analysis to Rooney's later fiction, particularly *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* (2021), to determine whether the trajectory toward more resilient and ethically grounded forms of interdependence continues or encounters new complications amid evolving personal and global crises. Such an extension would allow for a fuller diachronic mapping of relational dynamics across her oeuvre, tracing how her characters negotiate care ethics and vulnerability under intensified conditions of political awareness, climate anxiety, and pandemic-era isolation.

Comparative studies would also enrich the field. Placing Rooney's work alongside other contemporary explorations of friendship such as Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, or the fiction of

British and Irish writers like Sally Rooney's contemporaries (e.g., Naoise Dolan or Colin Barrett) could illuminate both shared millennial sensibilities and distinct cultural inflections. Additionally, examining Rooney's novels in dialogue with non-fiction accounts of friendship and solidarity in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, or with sociological studies of neoliberal subjectivity, would deepen the interdisciplinary potential of this framework. Another fruitful direction lies in the mediation and adaptation of these themes. Given the immense popularity of the television adaptations of both novels, research might investigate how visual and performative media translate (or transform) the subtle textures of communication failure, embodied vulnerability, and quiet recommitment that characterise Rooney's prose. Such analyses could explore whether screen portrayals reinforce or dilute the ethical force of solidarity as an everyday practice of care.

From a broader applied perspective, the insights generated by this research hold relevance for fields beyond literary studies. Educators and mental health practitioners working with young adults might draw on Rooney's nuanced depictions of relational autonomy and vulnerability to foster discussions around emotional interdependence, class-inflected shame, and the value of imperfect but sustained connection. In an age of widespread loneliness and digital disconnection, Rooney's fiction offers valuable literary resources for reflecting on the quiet labour required to maintain solidarity amid uncertainty.

Finally, future work should continue to interrogate the political and ethical stakes of everyday friendship in contemporary literature. By foregrounding care ethics and vulnerability theory, scholars can further challenge neoliberal narratives of self-sufficiency and contribute to wider cultural conversations about what forms of human connection remain possible and necessary in times of overlapping crises.

This study, while focused on two foundational texts, thus serves as an invitation to deeper and wider explorations of how contemporary fiction reimagines solidarity not as utopian ideal but as an imperfect, tenacious, and ultimately sustaining practice of being-with-others.

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