

Intersecting Narratives: Fan Culture and the Sally Rooney Metaverse

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In the ever-evolving landscape of modern literature, Irish author Sally Rooney has carved herself an indelible niche with several critically acclaimed novels—*Conversations With Friends*, *Normal People*, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, and *Intermezzo*—earning her a coveted spot within the literary canon. Amongst several remarkable literary predecessors, Rooney’s work has been compared to that of Jane Austen, venerable author of enduring classics such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, “in the way that characters miscommunicate and misinterpret each other’s feelings over and over again until readers want to reach into the pages and throttle them into a resolution” (Sucholdolski).

With incisive acumen, Rooney navigates the contours of contemporary relationships, peering into the intimate inner lives of her characters while gesturing toward social commentary. Only 26-years-old at the time of her first novel’s publication in 2017, her ability to capture and give voice to the complexities of life for the millennial generation has made her a sensation among readers and critics alike, contributing to the creation of Rooney’s public persona as a young disruptor injecting fresh perspectives into the mainstream.

Like Austen, enthusiasm for Rooney’s work has resulted in multiple on-screen adaptations. In 2020, Element Pictures produced a limited series adaptation of *Normal People* for BBC Three and Hulu in association with Screen Ireland. Like the novel, the series tracks the journey of Marianne Sheridan (played by Daisy Edgar-Jones) and Connell Waldron (played by Paul Mescal) as they transition from their secondary school in County Sligo, Ireland to undergraduate study at Trinity College in Dublin, exploring their complex and ever-evolving relationship from adolescence into new adulthood. The series was co-written by Sally Rooney and Alice Birch, with Lenny Abrahamson and Hettie Macdonald directing. Immediately upon its release, the series received widespread praise. Caroline Framke of *Variety* wrote:

With its trifecta of elegant writing, directing, and acting, Hulu's *Normal People* is just as bleak and uncompromising as Rooney's novel—a feat, and one that takes several episodes to fully absorb. In fact, it took me until about halfway through to understand just how much it was affecting me. ... As Marianne and Connell's relationship grows deeper, *Normal People* becomes as immersive as the book that inspired it, making you both crave and dread knowing—or perhaps more accurately, experiencing—what happens next.

Normal People's immense popularity amongst fans made overnight sensations of its previously unknown lead actors, Daisy Edgar-Jones and Paul Mescal, and inspired a devoted online following. Fans eagerly speculated about the personal lives of the actors, hoping that the on-screen romance between Marianne and Connell would translate to real life. Instagram accounts dedicated to the show, its characters, and its actors quickly emerged, with two pages in particular, “Connell Waldron’s Chain” (@connellschain) and “Marianne’s Bangs” (@mariannesbangs) gaining significant popularity. These pages were created in response to the now iconic costuming and makeup that came to symbolize the characters, a chain necklace and neatly trimmed bangs, showcasing the influence and significance of Rooney’s writing on contemporary fan culture.

Normal People and its success not only attest to Sally Rooney’s storytelling prowess, but signal as well a notable transformation of her expansive narrative realm from the printed page to

screen—a transformation that has given birth to what we might fittingly term the Sally Rooney metaverse. This nascent Sally Rooney metaverse, intricately interweaving her literary creations with their screen adaptations, forms a captivating tapestry resonating across both classic and contemporary mediums. Moreover, as fan culture flourishes across social media landscapes, this metaverse becomes a dynamic realm where narratives evolve beyond the confines of traditional literature. This convergence of text, image, and fan interaction not only provides a fascinating framework for analyzing the impact of contemporary art on our culture, but also underscores the enduring potency of stories in shaping collective narratives. Delving into the nuanced connections between these elements allows us to glean insights into how creative works intersect with society, enabling us to unravel the intricate threads that bind imagination, representation, and the human experience.

From the beginning, Sally Rooney has presented her literary work with the understanding that they exist within a shared narrative universe. In 2016, Rooney's short story "At the Clinic" was published in the London-based literary magazine *The White Review*. It follows two main characters, Marianne and Connell in their fictional debut, as Connell drives Marianne to a dentist's clinic to have a tooth removed. Fast-forward to 2017 and Rooney's debut novel, *Conversations With Friends*, is published. *Conversations with Friends* tells the story of two Trinity College students and ex-lovers, Frances and Bobbi, who perform spoken word poetry together. They are introduced to an older married couple, Nick and Melissa, developing a complex relationship with the couple that tests their own friendship and romantic feelings for each other. Like all of Rooney's works, the novel explores themes of love, relationships, sexuality, politics, and personal growth as the characters navigate their way through these complex dynamics.

Generally, "At the Clinic," *Normal People*, and *Conversations With Friends*, establish an initial connection with each other through setting. Marianne, Connell, Frances, and Bobbi are all Trinity College students working and studying in Dublin during the same period of time in the mid-2010s. However, with *Conversations With Friends* as her debut novel in 2017 and "At the Clinic" remaining a relatively obscure short story, it's interesting to note Rooney's intentionality in connecting her works beyond setting and through character. At several points throughout *Conversations With Friends*, Frances refers to an acquaintance within her friend group:

We met Marianne that afternoon, as well as her boyfriend, Andrew, who nobody really liked... We were sitting upstairs in a small cafe near College Green, and at some point the conversation turned to monogamy, a subject I didn't have anything to say about. At first Marianne was discussing whether nonmonogamy was an orientation, like being gay, and some people were "naturally" nonmonogamous, which led Bobbi to point out that no sexual orientation was "natural" as such (241-242).

The Marianne of *Conversations With Friends* is never explicitly identified as the Marianne Sheridan of *Normal People*, though they are universally accepted by readers as being the same character. *Normal People* was published in 2018, the year following *Conversations With Friends*. Rooney had already made the decision to expand "At the Clinic" into a novel-length work and likely wrote parts of *Normal People* during the development of *Conversations With Friends*. In an interview with *The New Statesman*, Rooney explained:

I kept wanting to write about these characters who were in their early twenties and their relationship had this texture to it because of their history. Eventually, I thought, what if I just went back and just told their story from the beginning, chronologically (Leszkiewicz).

With Marianne linking *Conversations with Friends* to *Normal People*, Rooney sets the precedent for her writing to be read as existing in a shared literary universe. Her other works, including “Mr Salary,” “Color and Light,” and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* can easily be read as parts of a shared narrative universe, despite not sharing any characters, because they are all set in the same contemporary, realist setting of Ireland, exploring similar topics and themes: class inequality, intimacy, intellectualism, art, and politics. Rooney’s approach to telling multiple stories within a singular universe heightens her readers’ experience, inviting them to uncover cross-references and thematic echoes scattered throughout individual texts, resonating with the core media studies concept of intertextuality—a rich interplay of references that enriches the narrative tapestry. Notably, her strategic groundwork paved the way for the emergence of a shared narrative universe, encompassing both her literary opuses and their cinematic adaptations—ultimately, affirming the evolving fusion of literature and screen media in the contemporary cultural landscape. The interconnectedness of her stories adds depth and complexity to her writing, creating a more immersive reading experience for fans of her work. Ultimately, this decision would lead to the creation of a shared narrative universe between Rooney’s collective literary and film adaptations once the story of Marianne and Connell was adapted for television.

In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins explores transmedia storytelling as narrative that “unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinct and valuable contribution to the whole” (95-96). In the case of literary adaptation to the screen, screen adaptations of literary works can contribute to a larger understanding of the shared universe of these texts by providing a visual and auditory representation of the world and characters created by the author. Adapting literary works into screen versions brings out details like setting and character, enhancing our grasp of the original text. Such adaptations offer fresh viewpoints on the story and characters, fostering deeper analysis of the shared universe.

Transmediation seems especially well-suited to material like Rooney’s, which is rooted in miscommunication between characters within the setting of a realistic, recognizable world. The subtle gestures, unclear motives, and awkward social interactions between Marianne and Connell become embodied through their transmediation to the screen, deepening a previous reader’s understanding of the characters and contributing to new analyses on Rooney’s material from a fresh perspective.

For example, several months into a successful relationship during their first year at Trinity, Marianne and Connell break-up. Each remembers the event differently in the novel, with Rooney writing altered versions of events depending on whose perspective the reader is following. The event is never read about in the present-tense; it is only ever reflected upon and accessed as memory. At the first moment of reflection, the event is described from Marianne’s perspective:

Marianne hasn’t seen him since May. He moved home after exams and she stayed in Dublin. He said he wanted to see other people and she said: Okay. Now, because she was never really his girlfriend, she’s not even his ex-girlfriend. She’s nothing (114).

As the novel continues, the build-up to the couple’s break-up is explained in greater detail. Connell, not as financially stable as Marianne, has to leave Dublin for the summer to work. Because he suffers from an unnamed anxiety disorder, he is unable to ask Marianne if he can stay with her. She misinterprets his reluctance as indifference, as seen in the novel’s second moment of reflection regarding the break-up, described now from Connell’s perspective:

So you'll only be gone three months.

Yeah.

There was a long pause.

I don't know, he said. I guess you'll want to see other people, then, will you?

Finally, in a voice that struck him as truly cold, Marianne said: Sure.

He got up then and poured his coffee down the sink, although it wasn't finished. When he left her building he did cry, as much for his pathetic fantasy of living in her apartment as for their failed relationship, whatever that was (129).

The nature of Connell and Marianne's break-up differs in both tellings; however, since Connell's retrospective on the event is the more detailed and grounded, the reader may be led to believe that his is the truer version of events. Until, months after their break-up and after each has entered into a new relationship, the two have this interaction:

You know, I didn't really know what was going on with us last summer, he says. Like, when I had to move home and that. I kind of thought maybe you would let me stay here or something. I don't really know what happened with us in the end.

She feels a sharp pain in her chest and her hand flies to her throat, clutching at nothing.

You told me you wanted us to see other people, she said. I had no idea you wanted to stay here. I thought you were breaking up with me... You would have been welcome, obviously. You always were (156).

The ambiguity of Connell and Marianne's break-up splits the blame between the two, adding complexity and nuance to reader's understanding of their relationship. Throughout *Normal People*, Connell and Marianne's relationship is depicted as complex and multifaceted. They share a deep connection and understanding of one another, but find themselves consistently plagued by misunderstandings, miscommunications, and personal, solitary struggles. As a result, the reasons for their break-up are never clarified or fully explained, leaving the reader to interpret and debate what went wrong and who is to blame.

Rooney's pairing of nuance and ambiguity within the grounded reality of her narrative universe is one of its strengths, yet it also presents a challenge to screen adaptations of her work. In developing the adaptation, should Connell and Marianne's break-up scene be referenced, but not seen? Should separate versions be filmed from both Connell and Marianne's perspective? Should the "true" event be shown in the adaptation, with each character taking away a different understanding of the singular event witnessed by viewers? Artistically, any of these approaches could be used in adaptation, recontextualizing the original text and operating as Jenkin's "distinct and valuable contribution to the whole."

The television adaptation of *Normal People* remains surprisingly (and impressively) faithful to the source material in its handling of the break-up. In episode six, Connell faces the circumstances that led to his departure from Dublin: losing his job and not being able to afford the summer rent. Despite this, he and Marianne continue to enjoy their relationship until the final moments of the episode. In the penultimate scene, the couple is at a party with their friends; then, in swift, jarring cut, we see Marianne alone, crying, as Connell abruptly leaves her flat, ending the episode.

Episode seven picks up several weeks later, just like the novel. Connell and Marianne have begun to see other people and awkwardly work towards a tense friendship. Like the novel, episode seven cuts back to memories of the event from both Connell and Marianne's perspectives. First, the full interaction of the break-up is seen from Connell's perspective:

CONNELL: I guess you want to see other people, or, uh...

MARIANNE: I guess so. Yeah.

Then, as a voiceover reflecting her thoughts, the break-up is seen from Marianne's:

CONNELL (V.O.): So, I guess we should see other people.

In both the novel and the adaptation, Connell's version of events is the more detailed. A longer scene is described or played out, as opposed to Marianne's ambiguous recollection across both mediums of what was said between them. Through adaptation and the physical embodiment of these characters and their universe, audiences gain insights into their personalities, their development, and the neuroses at the root of their problems. Through visual storytelling, it becomes more immediately clear that Connell experiences intense anxiety and that Marianne is deeply insecure. The grounded scene from Connell's perspective allows audiences to witness Paul Mescal's physical performance as the character, communicating his anxieties through tone and body language. Meanwhile, the voiceover playing during Marianne's moment of reflection communicates her insecurities, as the line "I guess you want to see other people" is changed to "I guess we should see other people." The line change recontextualizes the break-up: based on Connell's version of events, the audience might interpret the break-up as a mutual decision caused by miscommunication; based on Marianne's, the break-up was suggested by Connell, representing his rejection of their relationship. By delivering the line change as voiceover rather than an alternative scene, the adaptation communicates to the audience that this has happened in Marianne's head and is not representative of true events. The ambiguity of Connell and Marianne's break-up splits the blame between the two in the novel, complicating readers' understanding of the relationship. Through choices made in adaptation, the complexity of their relationship remains; however, the visual medium seems to suggest that the event shown from Connell's perspective was true, while acknowledging that each character has still misinterpreted the other's intention and misremembered key details.

At the end of episode seven, Connell and Marianne realize their mistake in a scene that remains faithful to the novel:

CONNELL: I don't know what happened with us last summer. I kind of hoped that I would've been able to stay here, that you would've let me. I don't really know what happened between us, to be honest.

MARIANNE: You said you wanted to see other people.

CONNELL: No.

MARIANNE: I thought you were breaking up with me. You never said anything about wanting to stay here. I... that would've been... Always. Obviously.

Screen adaptations of literary texts have the unique ability to use visual storytelling to offer new insights and perspectives on the original material, while still capturing its emotional and thematic essence. By analyzing the ways in which the screen adaptation of *Normal People* approaches Connell and Marianne's break-up, we can understand how Rooney, Birch, Abrahamson, and Macdonald have drawn upon the strengths of both mediums to heighten a dedicated audience's understanding of *Normal People*'s characters, as well as craft the atmosphere and tone of Rooney's broader, multimedia narrative universe.

The screen adaptation of *Normal People* was a massive hit with viewers and critics alike. The show was praised for its realistic depiction of young love, the chemistry between its leads, and its handling of sensitive topics like mental health and consent. Daisy Edgar-Jones and Paul Mescal received critical acclaim for their performances and their onscreen chemistry became a global phenomenon. The show was nominated for multiple awards, including four Emmy nominations, and won numerous accolades, such as the BAFTA Television Award for Best

Mini-Series. Mescal won the BAFTA for Best Actor in 2021 and a Critics' Choice Television Award for Best Actor in a Movie/Miniseries that same year. The success of the show also led to new career opportunities for Edgar-Jones and Mescal, with both actors landing high-profile roles in film and television projects.

The critical acclaim received by *Normal People* played a significant role in securing the future of Sally Rooney's multimedia narrative universe, with the screen adaptation of her novel, *Conversations with Friends*, being greenlit for production within months of *Normal People's* premiere.

The show's overwhelming fan response resulted in the development of a metaverse centered around Rooney's works, offering new opportunities for fans to engage with her stories and characters beyond the page and screen. Transmediation—reading, writing, viewing, and listening—all become interdependent ways of experiencing the metaverse.

As part of *Normal People's* marketing campaign, character playlists for Connell and Marianne were shared on Spotify, with contributions made by Mescal, Edgar-Jones, and the show's music supervisors, Maggie Phillips and Juliet Martin, to curate the definitive soundtrack for their characters. Initially, the character playlists captured what's described in their Spotify description as "the personality and emotions of the complex and layered" characters of the show, introducing listeners to the internal worlds of Connell and Marianne. However, once the show ended, these playlists allowed listeners a way to re-enter the Rooney-verse on a larger scale. In an article for *British Vogue* titled "These Playlists Will Fill The Hole Finishing 'Normal People' Has Left In Your Life," Alice Cary asserts that these playlists "will transport you straight back to Sligo." Later, Cary identifies developments in fan engagement centered around the Spotify playlists:

Normal People super-fans will know Spotify playlists believed to have been compiled by Rooney herself while she was writing the novel have been circulating online, and sure enough, there are some overlaps with those and the track-lists that Hulu has put together for viewers. Wicklow native Anna Mieke is the emerging singer behind the soothing sounds of "Warped Window", which serves as the soundtrack to Connell and Marianne's first kiss in episode one, while Lisa Hannigan's similarly harmonious "Undertow" plays as Connell receives a late-night text from Marianne during their time at Trinity College.

Fans of Rooney's work eagerly searched for additional content related to her work, leading them to discover her personal playlists created during the writing of her novel. The discovery of these playlists not only satisfied their hunger for more content, but provided them with an entry point to immerse themselves even further into her narrative universe. By comparing the tracks from Rooney's personal playlists to the songs included in the adaptations, fans were able to identify key songs and moments of overlap between the novel and its adaptation. Through this process, an essential, distilled playlist of songs was created, representing the "truest" musical representation of *Normal People* across mediums. Music has therefore become an integral part of the Sally Rooney experience, contributing to the development of a metaverse where fans can engage with and explore the world of the story through various forms of media.

In addition to the dozens of Instagram accounts dedicated to the show's actors, characters, aesthetic, and (in the case of @connellschain and @mariannesbangs) costuming and makeup, fan accounts dedicated to Rooney's books began to increase following the show's popularity, as viewers introduced to Rooney's narrative universe through the show began to cycle through her literary material. Fanfiction based on *Normal People* appeared on platforms like Tumblr, Wattpad, Archive of Our Own, and fanfiction.net within weeks of its premiere, with

titles such as “Two Years Three Months Later” offering a much-sought epilogue to Rooney’s nuanced, ambiguous ending.

Beyond the loose conglomeration of fans online, the desire for a continuation of Connell and Marianne’s story extends to well-known names and organizations. RTE Does Comic Relief, a charity in Ireland that raised money during the coronavirus pandemic, produced two videos for social media in June of 2020 featuring characters from *Normal People*. In one of the videos, titled “Older Normal People,” Connell and Marianne are seen 40 years in the future having a tongue-in-cheek conversation about beans on toast. The older Connell is played by Peter McDonald, while Marianne is played by Deirdre O’Kane. The comedic nature of the skit and its casting of new actors for Connell and Marianne distinguishes it as parodic in nature while still providing a what-if scenario for fans seeking an epilogue to the original story.

The second video produced by RTE Does Comic Relief, “Normal People Confessions,” has greater implications regarding Rooney’s narrative universe and its development towards a Rooney metaverse. Unlike the previous skit, “Normal People Confessions” features the return of Edgar-Jones and Mescal as their characters from *Normal People*, alongside Andrew Scott as his character, the (Hot) Priest, from season two of *Fleabag*. In the skit, Connell and Marianne go to confess their sins to the priest. Connell begins by saying, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I’m in love, but it’s complicated,” to which the priest replies, “Tell me about it,” in reference to his own romantic arc in *Fleabag*. The skit ends with Marianne replacing Connell in the confessional to admit her own sin: stealing the chain that Connell wears to great effect in *Normal People*. The priest is given the chain by Marianne, which Connell then asks be returned to him by the priest. This three-way connection amongst characters, with *Fleabag*’s priest as an intermediary, in effect represents the ways in which fans mediate their own Sally Rooney experiences. In one sense, it’s the expansion of Rooney’s work into the realm of another. In a second sense, the skit is a self-insertion, with the writers of “Normal People Confessions” voicing their opinions on Marianne and Connell through the voice of Andrew Scott’s (Hot) Priest.

In terms of Rooney’s narrative universe, the second skit by RTE Does Comic Relief expands it three times over, linking Rooney’s universe to that of *Fleabag* writer Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s, who began *Fleabag* as a one-woman play of the same name. Both universes exist within a realistic, contemporary, English-speaking, European setting and grapple with similar themes and ideas, resulting in a coalescence that feels natural and seamless. The skit is a testament to the appeal and resonance of both Rooney and Waller-Bridge’s work, as well as the potential for transmedia storytelling to expand and connect narrative universes.

However, the development of the broader metaverse owes more to just Rooney, Waller-Bridge, and their established publishers or producers. In his theory-making on convergence culture, Henry Jenkins explores “the flow of content distributed across various intersections of media, industries and audiences, presenting a back and forth power struggle over the distribution and control of content.” As fans began to engage with Rooney’s universe through the creation of fan accounts, public watch parties, and reaction videos, a burgeoning transmediation appeared in the form of fanfiction and amateur skits across social media, with the whims and expectations of fans beginning to take creative control.

The trajectory from engaged fan to creative contributor can be seen obliquely in the attention paid to Connell’s chain, notorious for its fan account on Instagram. In the novel, the chain is mentioned only briefly. Marianne notices it on Connell and remembers it as something she saw him wearing during their time together in highschool. Later, as explained by Vox in an article entitled “How chain necklaces for men got sexy”:

[I]ntended to signify Connell's working-class background... The chain was briefly referred to in the novel by Marianne's best friend as "Argos chic," in reference to a retailer that's described as the United Kingdom's equivalent of Target or Walmart... Costume designer Lorna Marie Mugan revealed on a radio show that Paul Mescal, the actor who plays Connell, insisted on wearing a chain for his character (Nguyen).

In the referenced interview with *RTE Radio 1*, Mugan revealed the fate of Connell's chain from the show, explaining:

Paul [Mescal] gifted it to Daisy [Edgar-Jones] at the end and then we had to get it back from her for photos and then it got lost. Then I found it in a shoe so I posted it to Daisy, so that's where it is (D'Arcy).

Rooney wrote two, brief references to Connell's chain in the original text; Paul Mescal, intent on embodying his character, requested a chain from costuming; Lorna Marie Mugan, the costume designer, selected the chain for Mescal to wear; audiences, taken with the chain for various reasons, developed a fixation, which resulted in memes and the creation of fan accounts like @connellschain on Instagram; pop culture journalists, recognizing the phenomenon, wrote articles in response, such as: "Connell's Chain in Normal People, Explained: How Chain Necklaces For Men Got Sexy" and "The Science Behind Connell's Erotic Silver Chain in Normal People: Why We've All Been Seduced." Curiosity around the chain led to questions being posed about it to members of the production, including Mescal, Edgar-Jones, and Mugan, each of whom repeated the story of Mescal gifting Edgar-Jones the chain. RTE Does Comic Relief used fans' fixation on the chain as inspiration for the "Normal People Confession" skit, which resulted in the final bit where Marianne asks the priest from *Fleabag* to forgive her for stealing Connell's chain. Later, the original chain was auctioned off by Edgar-Jones to raise money for charity. This example reveals how fans can become fixated on a property, turning minor props and details into viral phenomena through social media and the creation of online communities.

Jonathan Gray and Cornel Sandvoss' introduction to *Fandom*, titled "Why Study Fans?," provides insights into the motivations and behaviors of fans and how their engagement with media texts contributes to the transmediation of narratives across different platforms. Expanding on this, Gray and Sandvoss explain in Section V of *Fandom*, "Shifting Contexts, Changing Fan Cultures: From Concert Halls to Console Games," that fans' "attachments to particular icons and texts are informed not only by the geographical and cultural but also the historical, social, and technological contexts of their consumption practices" (320). The phenomenon surrounding Connell's chain demonstrates how fans can shape and influence popular culture across a variety of consumption practices, revealing the extent to which the medium of their consumption and the emotional attachments they form to specific texts are shaped by factors beyond the text alone. The response to Connell's chain also highlights the ways in which geographical and cultural contexts can be misinterpreted, ignored, or recontextualized by fans. With the reference to Connell's chain being "Argos chic," Rooney was attempting to communicate Connell's working class background, which an Irish or UK fan would recognize. However, due to Mescal's appeal and the memeing of the chain across social media to an international fanbase, that context has often been ignored. Now, jewelry brands like CRAFTD advertise a pricey "Connell Chain," inspired by self-described Marxist Sally Rooney's working class character.

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey uses "psychoanalysis to discover where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded [them]" (803). Mulvey offers a critical framework for analyzing the construction of visual

pleasure in media adaptations, which can be applied to the analysis of Rooney's works and their transmediation. Among fans, Paul Mescal has been praised for his performance as Connell Waldron, fascinating audiences with the quiet masculinity, physicality, sexuality, and emotional vulnerability he brought to the role. *Normal People*, premiering in a post-#MeToo environment, was praised for its use of an intimacy coordinator on set and for its depiction of full-frontal nudity of the show's male lead alongside his female co-star, which, historically, has not been depicted equally in television or film. Mulvey explains how, "Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (805).

Mescal, and by extension Rooney, provide a response to the mainstream order by establishing a feminist appeal. Connell defies traditional masculine stereotypes by openly expressing vulnerability, emotional sensitivity, and a willingness to communicate. His respectful treatment of Marianne challenges gender norms, as he values her autonomy and agency. The portrayal of their complex relationship underscores themes of equality, consent, and mutual respect, aligning with feminist ideals. Connell's growth also involves confronting toxic masculinity both inward and outward, making his character a progressive example of redefining masculinity within a feminist framework.

However, while Rooney's work focuses on gender equality, feminist ideals, and healthy, respectful approaches to sexuality, it is not guaranteed that these values will be reflected in the interpretations of her fans. In a 2023 interview with *ES Magazine*, Mescal recounts a recent incident in which he was assaulted by a female fan:

A woman recently stopped Paul Mescal to ask whether she could have her photo taken with him. They were outside the Almeida Theatre in Islington where Mescal was starring in a sellout run of the Tennessee Williams classic, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. "As we posed for it, she put her hand on my ass," he says with a frown. "I thought it was an accident, so I like..." he gets up from his chair and shimmies awkwardly away from an imaginary hand, "but the hand followed. I remember tensing up and feeling just, like, fury." So what did he do? "I turned to her and said, 'What're you doing? Take your hand off my ass'" (Jones).

It's essential to recognize the potential for media to shape perceptions and an understanding of important issues, such as body autonomy and healthy relationships. However, it's also important to acknowledge that audience interpretation is not always within the control of the creator and that discussions and critiques of media can help to shape how it is received by a wider audience. Authorship has been expanded to include Mescal's fans, who perform intended and unintended readings at their own discretion. As Mescal continues his interview with *ES Magazine*, he provides his final thoughts on the assault and shares insights into his relationship with fame since *Normal People*, explaining:

"The last thing I want to do... is call somebody out in front of the theatre — it's uncomfortable for everyone involved — but it was really not okay. It was so gross, creepy." This has been Mescal's experience of fame so far, he tells me: "97 percent of it is really nice — then 3 percent is somebody, like, grabbing your ass."

In addition to studying how fan culture develops and fosters community, it's important to acknowledge the ways in which fan culture can perpetuate harmful behaviors and attitudes, including the objectification and harassment of actors. By promoting respectful and responsible fan behavior, the more positive and inclusive ideology communicated through Sally Rooney's body of work can continue to resonate.

Despite his negative experiences with some fans, Paul Mescal has also had positive interactions with high-profile admirers of his work, including singer-songwriter Phoebe Bridgers. The two began a romantic relationship in May of 2020 with a tweet in which Bridgers expressed her admiration for *Normal People*. Emily Gulla explains in the “Paul Mescal and Phoebe Bridgers’ Relationship Timeline” for *Cosmopolitan*:

Phoebe and Paul were first linked in a very 2020 fashion: on Twitter. Revealing that she'd completed *Normal People*, which sees Paul playing lead character Connell, Phoebe tweeted, “finished *Normal People* and now I’m sad and horny oh wait”. Responding just as we’d expect, Paul tweeted back, “I’m officially dead.” with Phoebe then replying, “Nooo don’t die you’re so talented aha.”

In a separate article for *W Magazine*, their interaction is offered additional context:

Mescal’s excitement makes sense. He was a fan of Bridgers’s long before *Normal People* put him on the map. In December 2019, the actor shared his Spotify Wrapped, revealing Bridgers to be his top artist of the year. That’s the fun thing about Internet relationships, they can be completely tracked from (before the) start to finish, and fans of the pair have been delighted to dig up every little nuance over the years (Twersky).

Twersky’s observation that “fans of the pair have been delighted to dig up every little nuance” reflects much of the fervor surrounding the development of Mescal and Bridgers’ relationship. Following their viral Twitter exchange, the pair were invited by *Wonderland* magazine to co-host an Instagram Live. At one point, Mescal says, “I think it’s well documented that I love your music,” with Bridgers replying to their thousands of viewers, “Well, that makes me blush” (Gulla). Fans then relied on hints and clues across social media to deduce that Mescal and Bridgers had begun dating; eventually, the pair went public, but broke-up at the end of 2022.

The relationship between Mescal and Bridgers serves as an example of the positive and constructive nature of fandom when conducted with mutual respect and admiration. As fans of one another, Mescal and Bridgers shared an appreciation for their work as artists across different mediums. This is a celebrity romance that most (if not all) of their fans celebrated. However, Mescal and Bridgers’ relationship is complicated by their role as fans themselves, with their initial understanding and attraction to one another rooted in the public personas and cultivated narratives. As a result, their personal lives and romantic relationship have become inextricably linked to these narratives, posing the question: can one see the other as separate from their fictional persona? Can Bridgers see Mescal independent of the character Rooney wrote into existence?

For other fans of Mescal and Bridgers, distinguishing the boundaries between the real-life people, their fictional personas, and the narrative worlds they navigate is more difficult. In late 2020, Mescal starred in the music video for Bridgers’ song “Savior Complex,” directed by and co-starring none other than Phoebe Waller-Bridge, lead actor and creator of *Fleabag*. Emily Gulla captures the sentiment widely shared by fans of Mescal, Bridgers, and Waller-Bridge in her article for *Cosmopolitan*, writing: “Honestly, it’s the crossover of dreams.”

From there, Bridgers and her music more directly engaged with the Sally Rooney metaverse. Commissioned to write and perform an original song for the Hulu/BBC production of *Conversations With Friends*, Bridgers released the song “Sidelines” in early 2022. The song added a musical dimension to the larger Rooney-verse, creating a symbiotic relationship between the original text, the television adaptation, and Bridgers’ catalog of music. This convergence of different media forms in the transmediation of Rooney’s works not only enhances the emotional impact of Rooney’s narratives, but creates new opportunities for fan

engagement and interpretation via listening parties, covers, and attendance at live performances. While Bridgers herself doesn't appear in *Conversations With Friends*, "Sidelines" tonally and thematically resonates with Rooney's universe, instilling in fans the sense that Bridgers herself has been cast into the Rooney-verse. Meanwhile, the original music video for "Sidelines" features Bridgers performing the song in a studio, interspersed with clips from the show. This visually implies that Bridgers has entered the world of *Conversations With Friends*, which exists in the same narrative universe as *Normal People*, starring her real-life partner.

Oddly enough, Mescal and Bridgers are not the only actor-musician couple mixed up in the Rooney-verse. Starring in *Conversations With Friends* as Nick Conway, the male romantic lead, is Joe Alwyn. In addition to being recognized for his successful acting career, Alwyn is best known as the long-time partner of pop superstar Taylor Swift. In 2022, Swift acknowledged this connection when she posted an Instagram Story featuring a *Time* magazine headline praising the series. Swift's caption read: "Can confirm it's phenomenal" (Malkin). Since then, members of the Rooney-verse and their significant others have continued to collaborate. Bridgers and Swift have performed together musically, most recently alongside Matty Healy of The 1975 during the opening set of Swift's *Eras* tour. Mescal and Alwyn have engaged in multiple talks and interviews with one another, including an "Actors on Actors" interview, during which they describe themselves as members of the self-described "Tortured Man Club." In an article published by *Paper* magazine, the two are introduced as having starred "in TV adaptations of novels written by the patron saint of sad girls, Sally Rooney." Later, the article quotes the pair's "Actors on Actors" interview, which expounds on the "Tortured Man Club":

"So what's the name of the WhatsApp group that we're in?" Mescal asked Alwyn of their group chat. And according to *The Favourite* star, it's supposedly called "the Tortured Man Club."

"It's me, you — and Andrew Scott started the group," Alwyn continued, referring to none other than *Fleabag*'s infamous Hot Priest, who he also said was the most frequent texter. "He's just on it every day. He's just on it by himself," Alwyn explained before adding that Scott is often "just messaging himself good mornings."

Granted, the "Tortured Man Club" moniker does make sense, given that they're both dating musicians whose work is often extremely emotive and confessional, with Alwyn seeing Taylor Swift and Mescal reportedly engaged to Phoebe Bridgers (Cattermole).

Once more, the Rooney-verse and the Waller-Bridge-verse collide. However, rather than the collision occurring due to actors playing their fictional characters on screen, the collision occurs because the fictional characters have now informed the ways in which the real-life actors are both seen and see themselves, blurring the line between fact and fiction. Connell Waldron, Nick Conway, and the (Hot) Priest all share similarities in their romantic, "tortured" existence. Paul Mescal, Joe Alwyn, and Andrew Scott's group chat, tongue-in-cheek as it may be, reflects how the trio has adopted the "tortured" identities of their characters as their own. The actors perpetuate this idea in their interviews, which encourages fans to engage and make these connections on their own. We see this at work in Cattermole's piece: in order to justify the naming of the "Tortured Man Club," Cattermole immediately makes connections between Rooney's fictional characters, the actors, and the "extremely emotive and confessional" music of Mescal and Alwyn's real-life partners. Like an ouroboros, art imitates life, life imitates art, and on the cycle goes.

Interestingly, after Joe Alwyn and Taylor Swift broke up, Swift released her album *The Tortured Poets Department*, a title that many have speculated bears a striking resemblance to

Alwyn’s “Tortured Man Club” group chat. Whether intentional or coincidental, the connection reinforces the ongoing interplay between art, celebrity, and fan interpretation, as Swift’s work—like Rooney’s—continues to blur the lines between personal narrative and public mythmaking. This latest development further underscores how the “tortured” archetype, initially rooted in Rooney’s fictional men, has taken on a life of its own, extending beyond literature and screen adaptations into the very real cultural discourse surrounding these figures.

Meanwhile, Paul Mescal’s personal and professional trajectory continues to intersect with these evolving narratives. His high-profile breakup with Phoebe Bridgers and subsequent romance with Gracie Abrams—a singer-songwriter who opened for Taylor Swift and is frequently compared to Bridgers—further reinforces the cyclical nature of the Rooney-verse’s metanarrative. Just as Mescal became entangled in the emotional resonance of his *Normal People* character, his real-life relationships continue to be scrutinized through the lens of the “tortured” archetype that both he and Rooney have cultivated.

Returning to the screen, *All of Us Strangers*, a captivating, ghostly gay romance helmed by Andrew Haigh, marked a reunion between Paul Mescal and Andrew Scott, joined by an ensemble cast boasting luminaries such as Jamie Bell and Claire Foy. Haigh’s adaptation of Taichi Yamada’s renowned novel *Strangers* offers an intricate exploration of human connections in a supernatural context. As the enigmatic relationship between Adam (Andrew Scott) and Harry (Paul Mescal) unfolds against the backdrop of present-day London, Haigh’s penchant for nuance suggests a deeper exploration of human intimacy. With the unexpected resurgence of Adam’s deceased parents portrayed by Foy and Bell, the film ventures into an eerie and possibly sensual terrain, inviting audiences to ponder the mysteries of existence and desire. Much like Rooney’s narrative universe, *All of Us Strangers* teases the boundary between reality and fiction, inviting us to consider how storytelling shapes our perceptions and understanding of the world around us.

In a 2024 interview with *The New York Times*, Sally Rooney confirmed that she has no plans to adapt her third novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, for the screen. Reflecting on the overwhelming attention surrounding the *Normal People* adaptation, Rooney explained, “I don’t think I would want to do another one,” citing the intense public discourse as a primary factor in her decision (Shafer). She elaborated, “It did feel like it was getting further and further away from me, and I felt like I needed to just return to the place where it’s me and the book” (Shafer). This response suggests that the experience of seeing her work transformed into a cultural phenomenon deeply influenced her approach to storytelling—not only in subject matter but in how she now navigates the treatment of her fictional universe from a meta perspective.

Since the publication of *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, Rooney has released *Intermezzo*, a 2024 novel that deepens her engagement with the archetype of the tortured male protagonist. Unlike her earlier works, which primarily explored romantic entanglements and class tensions, *Intermezzo* shifts its focus to two brothers grappling with the death of their father, weaving grief, familial bonds, and the weight of masculinity into its emotional core. This evolution not only expands Rooney’s thematic concerns but also reframes the discourse surrounding her work, challenging audiences to engage with a more existential and interior form of male suffering. Given the cultural aftershocks of *Normal People*—and the particular intensity of Paul Mescal’s portrayal of Connell Waldron—it is worth considering whether Rooney’s latest novel would have taken this shape had *Normal People* remained solely a literary phenomenon. The entanglement between artistic intention and audience reception has, in many ways, shaped Rooney’s trajectory, yet with *Intermezzo*, she asserts greater narrative autonomy. By eschewing



adaptation and resisting the gravitational pull of the fan-driven metaverse, Rooney signals a desire to reclaim her work on her own terms, even as the cultural ecosystem she helped create continues to evolve without her.

The interconnected narrative universe of Sally Rooney's works highlights the ways in which creative works intersect with society, shaping the stories we tell and the perspectives we hold. As we continue to see more adaptations of Rooney's work, we may see her awareness of the metaverse inform its next evolution. In an era where media consumption is not a passive act, the Rooney-verse represents a paradigm shift. It's a space where narratives transcend pages and screens, where characters and creators coexist, and where fans contribute to the ongoing dialogue of storytelling. As fan culture's influence continues to grow, the intersections between fictional worlds and lived experiences become more intricate, underscoring the enduring power of creative expression to shape our cultural landscape.

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