

## *(Im)possible Facilitating Environments: The Spaces of Family in Sally Rooney's Normal People*

### *Ambientes facilitadores (im)possíveis: Os espaços da família em Normal People, de Sally Rooney*

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**Abstract:** *Based on the concept of the “good enough” facilitating environment developed by pediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, this article aims at analyzing the family relationships depicted in the novel Normal People by Sally Rooney. By means of the contrast of experiences, Rooney develops two distinct family environments – for Connell Waldron, the space is nurturing; while for Marianne Sheridan, it is marked by violence. Through the dialogues between the protagonists and the information provided by the third-person narrator, which alternates between the points of view of both characters, it is possible to infer how these spaces impacted, positively or negatively, the coming-of-age process of the protagonists, especially in terms of their self-perception and in the choices they make over the four years covered in the novel.*

**Keywords:** *Sally Rooney; Normal People; D. W. Winnicott; Facilitating Environment; Family.*

**Resumo:** *Com base no conceito de ambiente facilitador “suficientemente bom” desenvolvido pelo pediatra e psicanalista D. W. Winnicott, este artigo tem como objetivo analisar as relações familiares retratadas no romance Normal People de Sally Rooney. Através do contraste de experiências, Rooney desenvolve dois ambientes familiares distintos – para Connell Waldron, o espaço é acolhedor; enquanto para Marianne Sheridan é marcado pela violência. Por meio dos diálogos entre os protagonistas e das informações fornecidas pelo narrador em terceira pessoa, que alterna entre os pontos de vista de ambos os personagens, é*

*possível inferir como esses espaços impactam, positiva ou negativamente, no processo de amadurecimento dos protagonistas, especialmente na autopercepção e nas escolhas que fazem ao longo dos quatro anos abordados pelo romance.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Sally Rooney; Normal People; D. W. Winnicott; Ambiente facilitador, Família.*

The spatial dynamics at work in Sally Rooney’s second novel, *Normal People* (2018), offer a compelling lens to explore the nuances of identity formation and transition to adulthood. In the novel, there is a significant dialectic between the pairs school-university and rural town–country’s capital. However, a seminal space precedes these: the foundational environment of home, the space of the family. In *The Poetics of Space* (2014), Gaston Bachelard develops the idea that the house is our corner of the world, “our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (26). Thus, the lessons, pains, and traumas experienced in this initial habitat serve as the foundation for the structure upon which identity will be built.

Pediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott asserts that humans are born with “inherited tendencies that fiercely drive the individual on in a growth process” (Winnicott 1968 314), such as the integration of the personality, which is a complex process involving the development of a sense of self and reality, crucial to the establishment of a cohesive personal identity. However, for this evolution to happen, Winnicott emphasizes the importance, in the early stages of life, of the presence of a “good enough” mother, who provides a reliable and a “good enough” environment that facilitates the child’s ability to internalize stability and coherence. Under these conditions, “the baby is able to make a developmental continuity of growth which is the beginning of health” (315). These concepts from Winnicott – especially the facilitating environment – can serve as a key framework for analyzing how the families depicted in *Normal People* provide support or hinder the protagonists’ coming-of-age process.

In the novel, Rooney explores the relationship between Connell Waldron and Marianne Sheridan through contrasts in the power dynamics each occupies in the spaces of their social interactions from 2011 to 2015, a period that marks the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood. The story begins in the small (and fictional) town of Carricklea, in Sligo, where Connell is popular in school, while Marianne is perceived as peculiar, distancing herself from her peers. Outside the school environment, Connell faces

a disadvantage on the power scale: his mother works as a cleaner in Marianne's mansion. Another significant role reversal occurs when, as young adults, they move to Dublin to attend college. In the urban center, Marianne excels in the interactions demanded by the academic life at the country's leading university. On the other hand, Connell begins to doubt his own worth since the codes of acceptance in Dublin, the capital city, include elements that were not considered relevant in his hometown, as seen in the passage below:

Back home, Connell's shyness never seemed like much of an obstacle to his social life, because everyone knew who he was already, and there was never any need to introduce himself or create impressions about his personality. If anything, his personality seemed like something external to himself, managed by the opinions of others, rather than anything he individually did or produced. Now he has a sense of invisibility, nothingness, with no reputation to recommend him to anyone. Though his physical appearance has not changed, he feels objectively worse-looking than he used to be. He has become self-conscious about his clothes. All the guys in his class wear the same waxed hunting jackets and plum-coloured chinos, not that Connell has a problem with people dressing how they want, but he would feel like a complete prick wearing that stuff. At the same time, it forces him to acknowledge that his own clothes are cheap and unfashionable. His only shoes are an ancient pair of Adidas trainers, which he wears everywhere, even to the gym. (70)

Marianne's experience contrasts sharply with his. She comes from an unwelcoming family environment and, as a result, does not feel the emotional impact of being away from her brother and mother; quite the opposite.

Even though we do not have access to the protagonists' early days of life, the narrator dedicates significant parts of the novel to the family dynamics of both characters, always centred on the maternal figure. Through a third-person narrator, alternating between the perspectives of Marianne and Connell, the reader learns how the relationship between mothers and children are crystallized, how the facilitating environment is formed during these years of coexistence, and whether it acquires characteristics of health or illness. As mentioned earlier, Rooney extensively employs the contrast technique to situate the environments in which the two were raised, such as the physical description of their homes (mansion vs. terraced house) as highlighting markers that position the characters in distinct social classes. This dichotomy is further underscored in the labor relations between the two families, which unfold explicitly

within the domestic sphere. The novel begins with Connell collecting his mother after her shift as a cleaner in Marianne’s mansion:

Marianne answers the door when Connell rings the bell. She’s still wearing her school uniform, but she’s taken off the sweater, so it’s just the blouse and skirt, and she has no shoes on, only tights.

Oh, hey, he says.

Come on in.

She turns and walks down the hall. He follows her, closing the door behind him. Down a few steps in the kitchen, his mother Lorraine is peeling off a pair of rubber gloves.

... Lorraine folds the rubber gloves up neatly and replaces them below the sink. Then she starts unclipping her hair. To Connell this seems like something she could accomplish in the car. (1)

In this passage, there is a parallelism between what Marianne and Lorraine are wearing. Following Connell’s perspective in this first chapter, the narrator tells the reader that Marianne is at ease, already halfway out of her uniform and barefoot. In Lorraine’s case, the notable item is the rubber gloves worn for cleaning. Encountering both of them in the kitchen in an unequal power position embarrasses Connell. He wishes his mother would not fix her hair there but rather in the car, away from Marianne’s eyes, away from this discomfort.

The subordinate position of Connell’s mother affects the relationship with Marianne. At school, they pretend not to know each other, “people know that Marianne lives in the white mansion with the driveway and that Connell’s mother is a cleaner, but no one knows of the special relationship between these facts” (2). Adding to this social difference between them is the fact that Marianne is considered “an object of disgust” (3) by their schoolmates, which shows the first reversal of power in the novel. These two factors lead Connell to keep the romantic relationship that he and Marianne begin a few days after their encounter in the kitchen a secret. Revealing these elements that both connect and separate them could destabilize the social status that he carefully constructed over the years to compensate for his “bad” family background, known to everyone in town:

She’s from a good family and Connell is from a bad one, that much she does know. The Waldrons are notorious in Carricklea. One of Lorraine’s brothers was in prison once, Marianne doesn’t know for what, and another one got into a motorcycle crash off the roundabout a few years ago and

almost died. And of course, Lorraine got pregnant at seventeen and left school to have the baby. (32)

To turn this situation around, Connell adopts a behavior at school in consonance with the norms, with no room for objections: he is a good friend, a good student, a good athlete. It is a performance, for others as well as for himself. The conditions listed in the passage above, combined with the fact that Connell does not know who his father is, could easily be used as an argument for a dysfunctional family environment. However, that is not the case in *Normal People*. The Waldron home is described as a pleasant, safe space with open dialogue and respect. These characteristics become evident when Connell compares his experience with the accounts of his friends:

When they fight with their fathers, the fights always seem to mean one thing on the surface but conceal another secret meaning beneath. When Connell fights with Lorraine, it's usually about something like leaving a wet towel on the couch, and that's it, it's really about the towel, or at most it's about whether Connell is fundamentally careless in his tendencies, because he wants Lorraine to see him as a responsible person despite his habit of leaving towels everywhere ... (46)

Lorraine is a central figure in Connell's life, a cultural and political reference, the person he does not want to disappoint. She serves as a moral compass, cautioning him against unjust or inappropriate behavior, especially when he hurts Marianne out of fear of being rejected by his friends. An example of one of these reprimands occurs when Connell, who has been involved with Marianne for months, invites another girl to the graduation party:

And you don't think maybe you should have asked her? she says. Seeing as how you fuck her every day after school.  
That is vile language to use.  
Lorraine's nostrils flare white when she inhales. How would you like me to put it? she says. I suppose I should say you've been using her for sex, is that more accurate?  
Would you relax for a second? No one is using anyone.  
How did you get her to keep quiet about it? Did you tell her something bad would happen if she told on you?  
Jesus, he says. Obviously not. It was agreed, okay? You're getting it way out of proportion now.  
Lorraine nods to herself, staring out the windshield. Nervously he waits for her to say something.

People in school don't like her, do they? says Lorraine. So I suppose you were afraid of what they would say about you, if they found out.

He doesn't respond.

Well, I'll tell what I have to say about you, Lorraine says. I think you're a disgrace. I'm ashamed of you. (55-56)

Connell struggles with his mother's statement, but the conversation is a catalyst moment for him to confront his behaviour and realise the consequences of his decision. After the party, Marianne stops attending school and ceases all communication with him. Connell then feels "a debilitating shame about the kind of person he'd turned out to be" (74). They will meet again only in Dublin, where it will be Connell's turn to feel inadequate among his study peers. Marianne, on the other hand, will be surrounded by friends, with a vibrant social life.

Faced with the feeling of non-belonging, it is to Lorraine that Connell turns for support. In the first scene in the capital city, we see him arriving at a university party. He did not want to be there, but he was encouraged to attend by his mother:

Connell knew going to a party on his own would be a bad idea, but on the phone Lorraine said it would be a good idea. I won't know anyone, he told her. And she said patiently: You won't get to know anyone if you don't get out and meet people. (66)

Although Lorraine always supports Connell when needed, she consistently encourages her son to have other experiences, as a way to introduce the principle of reality, one of the family functions mentioned by Winnicott (2021), which is the practice of gradually showing the limitations and hardships imposed by the world (49).

Throughout the novel, Connell faces challenges inherent to the coming-of-age process. For instance, while experiencing satisfaction with the evolution of his writing skills, Connell must also contend with symptoms of depression triggered by a school classmate's suicide, as well as the constant pain of physical and intellectual distance from those with whom he shared his youth. These obstacles are overcome, or at least alleviated, with the support of his mother – with his constant returns to his childhood home, highlighting the positive role of the family environment formed over the years by Lorraine.

While Connell is supported by a good enough facilitating environment, Marianne grows up surrounded by episodes of violence. In a conversation with Connell, she reveals that her father used to beat her mother up and that “sometimes” (43) she was also a target. Her father dies when Marianne is thirteen, and her brother, Alan, takes over the role of the aggressor. The narrator fills in the silences and gradually provides the reader with information about the extent of these violent acts. At the beginning of the novel, Alan appears impatient, and envious; he judges Marianne’s clothes, and monitors whom she goes out with. However, as the narrative progresses, we see their interaction shift towards physical attacks, culminating in a violent episode where Alan breaks his sister’s nose.

The way Marianne’s mother, Denise, handles what happens between the siblings is the key element to understanding the nature of this familial environment. Denise rarely reprimands Alan and often suggests that Marianne’s personality triggers such behaviors:

Denise decided a long time ago that it is acceptable for men to use aggression towards Marianne as a way of expressing themselves. As a child Marianne resisted, but now she simply detaches, as if it isn’t of any interest to her, which in a way it isn’t. Denise considers this a symptom of her daughter’s frigid and unlovable personality. She believes Marianne lacks ‘warmth’, by which she means the ability to beg for love from people who hate her. (65)

Marianne frequently feels that life is “happening somewhere very far away, happening without her, and she didn’t know if she would ever find out where it was and become part of it” (11). Therefore, the idea of leaving her family and hometown behind becomes attractive as the space of her house turns into a place she must escape from. Marianne sees the move to Dublin and enrolling in college as a chance for a “new existence” (34).

After creating a new life for herself, Marianne avoids returning to Carricklea. When Marianne’s visits to her family become necessary, Connell notes that her encounters with her family often end in arguments, and she always returns from her hometown “distracted and sullen” (104). During one such visit, the situation is described as tense, and Alan is anxious and aggressive due to her presence. He becomes irritated with questions about his sister’s academic success and takes advantage of a moment alone in the kitchen to belittle her. The interaction ends with Alan spitting on Marianne.

In the next paragraph, on Christmas Day, Denise Sheridan hands her an envelope with 500 euros as a gift, without any card or message. Marianne realizes it is the same envelope



her mother uses to pay Lorraine for cleaning. The narrator does not attribute adjectives to this gesture but rather creates space for us to equate Marianne's position with someone with whom Denise has only a work-related and transactional relationship.

Then, the mother questions Marianne about her plans for the post-college future, expressing concern about the shock the real world may cause her. When Marianne explains that no environment will be more aggressive than her relationship with her brother, who spat on her, Denise once again downplays the severity of the assaults and blames Marianne for Alan's reactions:

I'm worried the real world will come as a bit of a shock to you, said Denise.  
In what way? I don't know if you realise that university is a very protective environment. It's not like a workplace.

Well, I doubt anyone in the workplace will spit at me over a disagreement, said Marianne. It would be pretty frowned upon, as I understand.

Denise gave a tight-lipped smile. If you can't handle a little sibling rivalry, I don't know how you're going to manage adult life, darling, she said.

Let's see how it goes.

At this, Denise struck the kitchen table with her open palm. Marianne flinched, but didn't look up, didn't let go of the envelope.

You think you're special, do you? said Denise.

Marianne let her eyes close. No, she said. I don't. (143)

The dynamics within the household lead Marianne to perceive herself as unworthy of love and understanding. When Connell says he loves Marianne, her first reflection is that "she has never believed herself fit to be loved by any person" (44). This feeling is frequently addressed in the novel, with her often having relationships that lead to violent episodes. Confiding to Connell, Marianne sums up her anguish as follows: "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 181). The researcher Marcela Santos Brigida states, "Marianne replicates in her relationships a deep need to feel loved"<sup>1</sup> (2022, my translation). The character believes that something might have gone wrong with her at birth, justifying her supposed inability to love. However, throughout the novel, we observe that the crucial factor influencing her emotional relationships is, in fact, the environment she experienced during childhood and adolescence. With an environment far from facilitating, the tendencies for emotional maturity, as argued by Winnicott, found no means to establish themselves.



It is also important to note how the narrator depicts the Sheridan family, which has a traditional format (father, mother, and children) and better financial conditions, as the space of illness. Researcher María Amor Barros-Del Río points to a demystification of the nuclear catholic Irish family since the novel:

Quite evidently, *Normal People* debunks the ideological construction of the nuclear Catholic Irish family demonstrating that Connell's single-parent and loving family performs better than Marianne's insensitive mother and abusive brother. The effects of different family forms and experiences are clearly visible in the protagonists' divergent ties with their hometown and their sense of belonging. (180)

This phenomenon, of the affluent family that is not a nurturing space, is also explored by Winnicott. He asserts that families from lower socioeconomic classes “may be a safer and ‘good’ facilitating environment than a family with a beautiful house sheltered from common ills”<sup>22</sup> (2021 173, my translation). It is from this beautiful, yet unhealthy, space that Marianne must part ways to move towards emotional emancipation.

The severance of ties with the family occurs when in pursuit of Marianne, Alan forcefully pushes the door of her bedroom, striking her nose (241). Even in the face of such aggression, which lands the character in the hospital, Denise takes no action. Subsequently, Marianne moves in with Connell in Dublin, finds a job, and lives without assistance from her mother, who did not even attempt to contact her daughter after the incident. Only Alan sends messages, stating in one of them that Denise considers her daughter a disgrace (258).

Before the novel's closure, Marianne returns once more to Carricklea, this time to a different destination, to a new space that will serve as home: the Waldron household. She is welcomed by Connell's family during Christmas celebrations, enjoying pleasant moments with Lorraine, whom she identifies as “a really good parent” (42). On New Year's Eve, Marianne sees her mother at the supermarket. Denise walks past her without uttering a word. In the car, accompanied by Lorraine and Connell, Marianne asks what the people in town think of her mother:

What do people in town think of her? Marianne said.  
Who, your mother? said Lorraine.  
I mean, how do people see her?  
With a sympathetic expression Lorraine said gently: I suppose she'd be

considered a bit odd.

It was the first time Marianne had heard that, or even thought about it. (260)

The perception of others helps Marianne to change how she perceives Denise and the experiences she endured in the home environment for many years. The term “odd” is a rather mild word to describe the dynamics unfolding in the white mansion of the Sheridans. As a consequence of abandoning this place, Marianne makes room for a new conception of home, with Connell as the central figure. The conclusion of the novel, however, leads the two protagonists to separate and live on different continents; though bittersweet, the handling of such a fate carries a tone of optimism:

He probably won't come back, she thinks. Or he will, differently. What they have now they can never have back again. But for her the pain of loneliness will be nothing to the pain that she used to feel, of being unworthy. He brought her goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her. Meanwhile his life opens out before him in all directions at once. They've done a lot of good for each other. Really, she thinks, really. People can really change one another. (265-266)

For someone like Marianne, who was led for so many years to believe she was unworthy of love or affection, realizing that another person saw traces of kindness in her is like receiving a gift. This offering alleviates the anguish of separation, making loneliness seem less painful when contrasted with the treatment she received from her parents and brother during their years of living together. Even if Marianne never sees Connell again nor can she rely on his support, she understands that he propelled her toward building a kinder relationship with herself. The passage indicates that the bond they formed in those intense four years leaned more towards independence than dependence, proving to be a true facilitating environment for the early stages of adulthood. This is the final message conveyed by the novel: the inescapable impact others have on the formation of our identity – for better or for worse. The harsh reality is that the family, which should serve a healthy role in initiation into the world, is the space from which we will have to escape.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Marianne replica em seus relacionamentos uma necessidade profunda de se sentir amada ...”
- <sup>2</sup> “...podem ser um ambiente facilitador mais seguro e ‘bom’ do que uma família com uma casa bonita e que esteja resguardada dos males comuns.”

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