

Normal Love: Reading Sally Rooney as Social Theory of Romantic Relationships

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Introduction

For millennia, when people wanted to get a grasp of something as ubiquitous yet as elusive as love, they sought the counsel of a brilliant piece of literary fiction. From the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to Shakespeare's sonnets, great works of literature have been able to disclose the mysteries of romantic longing, passion, and sexual desire, making their perceivers somehow *know* what the great mystery is about through *feeling* it. Despite the immense transformation literature went through in the last centuries, love seems to be one of the most prevalent and resonant literary topics.

Since its foundation in the nineteenth century, sociology has been dealing with love rather reluctantly (Iorio, 2014; Rusu, 2017; Montagna, 2023). According to the foundational narrative, sociology had to earn its status among other scientific disciplines by adopting a more positivist and systematic approach to social phenomena. The 'culture of feelings' was then left to the supposedly more aestheticized realm of the *hommes de lettres* (Lepenies, 1988). This division created a double-edged relationship. On the one hand, sociology condescended to literature as its eccentric, impractical relative—less grounded in the empirical reality and thus less capable of valid truth claims. On the other hand, many sociologists admired fiction for its artistic appeal, endowing literary works with prodigious qualities and writers with the status of genius. Both perspectives rendered literature into a distant object—either to be frowned upon or to be worshiped as powerful but hard to grasp. As a matter of research interest, the literary meaning and literature's internal structure were mainly left aside on behalf of the aspects more intuitively approachable by sociology. Still, when sociologists deal with literature today, they focus primarily on its social surroundings: the socioeconomic context of its production

predominantly represented by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his followers (e.g., Franssen and Kuipers, 2015) and various social and cultural aspects of reception (most recently Thumala Olave, 2022). On rare occasions when social scientists approached literary works from the inside, they usually looked for specific features for developing their own agenda, e.g., Émile Durkheim's (2005 [1897]) literary references in *Suicide* or Alfred Schütz's (1976 [1953]) adoption of Don Quixote.

Only recently there has been a call for a more thorough sociological treatment of literary works, concerning their aesthetic specificity as a unique opportunity for understanding social life. The main feature of these studies is recognizing that literary texts can mediate unique and powerful social knowledge that is neither inferior nor epiphenomenal to sociological research. This paper builds on the presupposition that literature is an epistemological mode following its own criteria for theorizing social worlds. Rather than cutting, sorting, and categorizing literary works as research data, I suggest we follow the aesthetic experience of reading because that is where literary theorizing gets formed. Instead of looking at the social contexts of production and reception separately from the literary text, it is essential to follow the process of *mediation* between these spheres.

This study introduces a social theory of love that is latently present in reading the novel *Normal People* by the Irish writer Sally Rooney (2018). A social theory mediated by a novel is less cognitive and information-based and relies more on the aesthetic and emotional effects of the text upon the reader. Therefore, such a theory becomes manifest only during the act of reading—when the reader and the text get intertwined in a continuous aesthetic experience of reading. The experiential character of the social theory channeled by reading a novel brings a great advantage and poses a big challenge for sociology. First, reading the novel operates as an experiential signifier channeling both the sensual immediacy—via immersion in the text—and abstract representations—via referencing outside the text—as an indivisible cognitive/sensual

blend, which I further elaborate through the *iconic experience* concept. This feature grants that the nondiscursive and hard-to-grasp social phenomena are theorized *from the inside* of the social experience even before this experience is defined in the discourse, while at the same time *presenting*¹ this experience within broader and more persistent patterns and structures of feelings, or, as I will elaborate—social mood. Second, the big challenge is to unfold literary theorizing delicately with respect to literature’s own means of expression yet in a way that is robust and sociologically plausible. Therefore, I suggest employing a methodological triangulation: I investigate data concerning all stages of the author-text-reader communication chain—critical and non-scholarly reviews, scientific works, interviews, social media, etc.—and confront them with the inner structure of the novel. The goal is not to provide an exhaustive picture of *Normal People* in the global literary field, but rather to understand how the novel itself conveys meanings akin to social theorizing that are intersubjectively shared among diverse audiences.

More generally, this project goes in line with the recent explorations of ways sociology can account for social phenomena by forging an alliance with artistic practice, especially creative writing (Kilby and Gilloch, 2022). I probe the same epistemological grounds as the authors included in a recently published monograph of *The Sociological Review*, yet from the opposite side of the author-text-reader communication chain. While Lindsey A. Freeman (2022: 765) employs ‘[s]ociological poetry’ as ‘a way of theorizing while writing,’ I seek to show how sociologists can sensitively read literary fiction as a social theory. I, too, believe that literary techniques are well equipped to ‘convey social facts through the conjuring of atmospheres of

¹ As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2006: 319) points out, during reading the experience unfolds ‘in front of’ us in the very original sense of the Latin ‘prae-esse.’

meaning rather than didacticism’ (Freeman, 2022: 766). I also share Ash Watson’s (2022: 730; emphasis original) enthusiasm for the genre of sociological fiction that employs poetic devices to ‘*affect* a sociological perspective of the world.’ Contrary to these authors, however, I do not develop *new* ways of poetic writing for sociology, but I suggest exploring the wealth of sociologically insightful literary fiction that has already been written. I invite sociologists to discover and appreciate theories of the social that are implicitly channeled through reading literature that has been deemed vibrant and illuminating by those who already read it before us—critics, award committees, and most of all non-professional readers. With careful consideration of the literary text’s inner structure as well as the social contexts of its production and reception, I aim to unfold the literature’s accounts of seemingly fleeting yet highly decisive aspects of social life, which regular sociological writing often struggles to put into words.

Social Theory through Literature

Why does love leave many sociologists cold? There has been a curious gap between the omnipresent representation of love in Western societies and the insufficient attention paid to love by sociological research (Iorio, 2014; Rusu, 2017; Montagna 2023). Unlike prominent sociological headlines such as work, race, health, or family, there is little space dedicated to social facets of love. And those studies that somehow tackle the topic of romantic relationships often look at them from more traditionally sociological perspectives such as consumerism (Illouz, 2012), work ethic (Hochschild, 2003), individualization and secularization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), or loosening of social bonds (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1992). I argue that such negligence lies in what Niklas Luhmann (1986: 8) illustrated describing the method of his seminal book: ‘love will not be treated here as a feeling (or at least only secondarily so), but rather in terms of its constituting a symbolic code.’ Even though love is so pervasive and ubiquitous, sociologists can mostly approach it through the analytical discourse that involves codes, systems, and functions rather than feelings, emotions, and compassion. It is an

unsurprising bias: sociology simply talks more about things it finds easier to talk about. Love as a feeling, then, is left only a secondary significance.

This is also the case of probably the best known cultural sociological study of love by Ann Swidler (2013). Although Swidler's (2013: 34) famous analogy of 'culture as repertoire' implies an emphasis on the performative, i.e., nondiscursive dimension of social action, the actual focus is on the level of discourses, vocabularies, and the ways in which they overlap and contradict. As Swidler (in Swidler and Lamont, 2014: 159) later wrote, what she strove for was to capture love in terms of people's 'categorization systems.' The method of interview itself creates an artificial setting wherein the participants are made to put their feelings into words. Addressing also the underlying institutional patterns, Swidler's approach is clearly about more than rhetorical justifications (cf. Vaisey, 2014). However, when it comes to people's relating to love as deeply subjectively—and bodily—experienced social fact, relying on 'toolkits,' 'vocabularies,' 'ideologies,' or 'systems' seems rather unsatisfactory (cf. Champagne, 2023: 27).

Not only sociology lacks the proper tools to talk about love. Julia Carter (2013) shows that the 'absence of love stories' comes with the inherent deficiency of any written or spoken discourse. When Carter (2013) asked her respondents about their romantic relationships, they referred to practical issues, cherishing love as a private, inarticulate emotion. People do not generally walk around with a story about their emotional life at hand—and if they are asked, finding the right words is a difficult task. The lyrical genre refers to such insufficiency of language through the well-known trope 'struggling for words.' And as most poets know, the struggle for the right words to describe love is never-ending. That is why some sociologists resort to literature, whose aesthetic devices are much better equipped for such a task than sociology.

A famous example comes from Lewis A. Coser's *Sociology through Literature* (1963: 250-274), where romantic relationships are approached via excerpts from the sixteenth- to

nineteenth-century world classics. Mariano Longo (2019: 176-181) similarly chooses Tolstoy's writings to portray the intricacies of romantic love as a social fact. As a 'late-modern' counterpoint to Tolstoy, Longo (2019: 182) then selects the novel by Milan Kundera (1984) that he understands 'as a plausible literary representation of contemporary sociological analysis on love.' In *Why love hurts*, Eva Illouz (2012) uses examples from Balzac, Dumas, and Byron, and many others to illustrate her arguments. A special place belongs to Jane Austen, whose novels serve as a basis for the theory about 'the great transformation of love' (Illouz, 2012: 18) between traditional and modern Western societies. Here, the novel is not a mere aestheticized example of social behavior. According to Illouz (2012: 22), Austen draws a 'cultural model,' which contains 'systematically encoded cultural assumptions' akin to sociological ideal types. Howard Becker (2007: 241-242) develops a similar point, referring to *Pride and Prejudice* as 'a complex web of connected observations' that, structured in the form of narrative, present to us 'a well-constructed analysis of the marriage customs.' Although the particularities in the story are fictitious, what readers learn from the novel is, according to Becker (2007: 248), in some ways even superior to 'a well-done historical account'—the contingencies of the characters' emotional and interactional turmoil.

Andrew Balmer and Michael Durant (2021) go even further when they look at one of William Shakespeare's sonnets to explore the interactional characteristics of love related to lying. Putting Sonnet 138 in a dialogue with the writings of Georg Simmel, they 'read the sonnet as a kind of social theory in itself' (Balmer and Durant, 2021: 347). This allows them to explore love and lying in their most fleeting forms, as a paradoxical and volatile experience. The sonnet is not mere data to be sociologically analyzed, but it is a condensed expression of such experience. And, importantly, unlike social-scientific texts, the sonnet can provide a sense of understanding social experience without its explicit and discursively fixed definition. That is because the sonnet, like any literary genre, does not simply describe or illustrate the social

experience, but it *enacts* the experience within the reader.

The idea of literature as social theory is not a new one. In more or less explicit ways, sociologists have referred to literary works' capacity to think through, conceptualize, and elucidate social phenomena (Winter, 1975; Harrington, 2002; Szaló, 2017). Here I want to show how literary fiction aptly theorizes the fleeting yet heavily impactful social phenomenon of love through what makes literature unique vis-à-vis other means of textual expression—its emphasis on aesthetic form.

On Theory: Mood, Reading, and Iconic Experience

Unlike historical, social scientific, or journalistic accounts, literary fiction is well-suitable for studying socio-cultural phenomena with special emphasis on their emotional, existential, and nondiscursive qualities. Through aesthetic devices such as metaphor, simile, rhythm, and pace of the text, literary works treat social experience through a mode of phenomenological reduction, bracketing out certain phenomena to understand the world in a new way. Such bracketing is analogous to the method in cultural sociology as suggested by Jeffrey C. Alexander (2003: 240; cf. Winter, 1975: 34), where 'the ontological reality of perceived objects is temporarily repressed in order to search for those subjective elements in the actor's intentionality that establish the sense of verisimilitude.' Both the literary and the sociological text focus on phenomena in 'the ontological reality of perceived objects,' which transcend these objects and tell the reader something about more stable, patterned layers of social life. Therefore, readers often say that literature discloses a general 'essence' of social worlds (cf. Harrington, 2002).

The meaningful whole mediated by the literary work is an *emergent structure*: it emerges from the synthesis of micro-situational interactions and spatio-temporal modalities but becomes more than the sum of them. Literary scholars elaborated on this emergent sign referring to

Heideggerian *Stimmung*, usually translated as ‘mood’ or ‘attunement’ (Flatley, 2017). The mood ‘constitutes an overall atmosphere or “medium” in which our thinking, doing, and acting occurs, establishing the conditions for our encounter with the world’ (Flatley, 2017: 144). The mood does not come from individual minds and subjectivities of people, nor is it external to them, but it arises out of Being-in-the-world together as a collectivity. The mood cannot be accounted for through individual sensibilities—cannot be deduced from them—yet it shapes and navigates the social actions of the individual actors. Through phenomenological reduction by means of aesthetic textual devices, literature can mediate social understanding as a *unity*—the social mood upon which all social interactions feed—and as a polyvalent *ambiguity*—approaching romantic relationships and love in their interpretive openness, tacitness, and contingency.

Building on the iconic turn in cultural sociology (Alexander et al., 2012; Bartmanski, 2016), I employ the concept of iconic experience as the main analytical unit of literary communication. The iconic experience operates as an experiential signifier (Bartmanski, 2016: 546) that enacts social mood in the reader during reading. Eduardo de la Fuente (2019: 553) considers the iconicity model developed by the Yale School as one of the ‘textural modes of theorizing’ in sociology. The texture stands for a complex amalgam of material, aesthetic, sensorial, bodily, etc., and symbolic dimensions of social life that are mutually constitutive rather than hierarchical. Similar to mood, the idea of texture allows us to theorize multidimensionality and spatio-temporal openness of social life while keeping in mind its connectedness and interrelatedness. In the case of literary communication, the aesthetic devices of the novel maintain the feeling of a meaningful whole, a Lukácsian ‘totality’ (1963 [1937]), which is complex and dynamic and at the same time *makes sense* (hence the verisimilitude) to the reader as a single cumulative experience.

During literary production, the involved actors encode the mood into the text on two levels. On

a conscious level, they use their creative writing as a craft to theorize particular social realities similarly to sociological theorizing (Winter, 1975; cf. Swedberg, 2014: 16). Direct experience is *thickly described* (Geertz, 1974; on thick description as a literary tool see Davison-Vecchione and Seeger, 2021; Becker, 2007: 284) so that a small anecdotal vignette can account for large and persistent patterns. Importantly, when considering sensorial qualities of social life, the verisimilitude of thick description greatly relies on the author's stylistic finesse. Calling for a 'thicker description,' Dominik Bartmanski (2016, 544-546) suggests 'employing new metaphors,' asserting that 'metaphors in language are like icons in reality—they tend to be experiential.' Authors, then, strive to employ such 'thick' aesthetic forms that most adequately grasp a social mood through new and inventive ways. This idea is not far from what literary theorists such as Alain Robbe-Grillet (1989 [1965]) and Michel Butor (1969) promoted already in the early 1960s, that is, the novel imaginatively *theorizes* the world by inventing new formal means of *expressing* the world.

On an unconscious level, the mood is channeled via the institutional norms of writing (aesthetic standards, intellectual tradition, etc.) corresponding to a particular sociohistorical situation. The aesthetic devices in the text ensure especially that 1) the mood is preserved in the iconic sense, i.e., the text has a potential to immerse the reader and operate as a nondiscursive signifier; and 2) that the iconic experience of reading elicits cultural patterns and structures of feeling² that far exceed the individual experience of the author (cf. Solaroli, 2015: 32-40). If the immersion into the iconic sign is successful, the reader has a feeling of 'swimming through' the mood (Solaroli, 2015: 33)

² I borrow this term from Raymond Williams (1977: 133f) who defines the 'structures of feelings' as 'social experiences *in solution*' in contrast to 'other social semantic formations which [...] are more evidently and more immediately available'. 'In solution' here means in the process of emergence, not yet manifested.

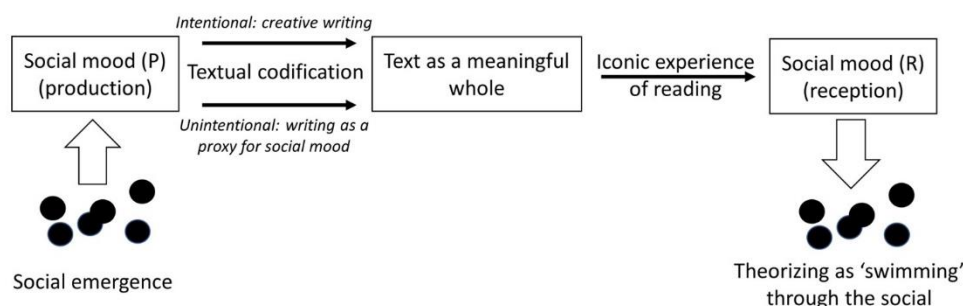


Fig. 1: Social mood in literary communication

Although the iconic experience of reading is not directly accessible, we can infer the convergent reading experiences from the hermeneutic dialogue between the text and its social contexts. In the context of production, authors encode their lived experience as well as all kinds of social and cultural patterns in which they are absorbed. This encoded experience is curated by gatekeepers (agents, publishers, editors, entrepreneurs) who also embody various norms. When the text gets materialized and starts to circulate, it attains a degree of autonomy from the authorial context depending on diverse reading publics. Different reading experiences compete and eventually converge into a set of more stable interpretations.³

On Method: Putting the Unspeakable into Words

To trace out how social theorizing emerges through the iconic experience of reading *Normal People* (henceforth addressed as NP), I look at the mediation process between all the stages of the author-text-reader chain. Unlike usual sociological studies of literature, however, I am not interested in the social surroundings of the novel as such, but I analyze social context to unfold latent meanings that NP evoke when read by diverse publics. While the studies that are

³ The set of interpretations is nevertheless prone to further shifts, for example, due to large political transformations such as change of political regimes but also cultural movements such as post-colonial and feminist re-reading of canonized books.

emblematic of the current sociology of literature and reception *analyze the social to understand the literary* (most typically Bourdieu, 1996; Griswold, 1987; Radway, 1991; for more recent cases see Childress, 2017; Santana-Acuña, 2020), my goal is to *read the literary to understand the social*. Therefore, I do not elaborate in depth on the dynamics of global publishing (Vimr, 2023; Franssen and Kuipers, 2015), commercialization (Kirkosová, 2022), the influence of advanced digitalization (Piorecký and Malínek, 2020; Hartmanová, 2021), and other sociological factors as driving forces of literary production and reception. I rather look at these factors to understand NP as a relatively autonomous agent that circulates within broader sociohistorical conditions yet cannot be wholly deduced from or explained by them.⁴

Methodologically speaking, the whole procedure of unfolding the implicit social theory mediated by NP was carried through the following process. First, I made myself acquainted with the reading experience by letting the text immerse and navigate my reading until I finished it without any self-imposed reflective and analytical interruptions. I attended to the ‘empathetic reading,’ a method that, according to Kerstin Norlander (2013: 10), is based on the proposition to

‘first understand a text on its own terms, and not until then express an opinion about it. The method implies a challenge to the reader’s preconceptions, which may sometimes be tough, but also opens up exciting reading adventures and the possibility of gaining new knowledge.’

Second, I focused on the reception of the novel. Overall, I did a close reading of 54 English-written reviews accessible from the book review aggregator website Book Marks (2023).⁵

⁴ I am indebted for this idea to Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith (2003) who devised a ‘strong program in cultural sociology’ for studying culture as an analytically independent variable, i.e., phenomenon irreducible to its social or material constituents.

⁵ I left out the reviews with dead links and those behind a paywall not covered by my institutional access.

Additionally, I skimmed through the 84 results that cite NP according to Google Scholar to get an idea of why authors of academic papers and theses find the novel relevant for their research. Interestingly, after excluding 15 non-English and duplicate entries, I discovered that the majority of sources (60) employed NP not as strictly literary material⁶ but rather as a representation, example, or even an analysis of broader social, cultural, or philosophical phenomena. I analyzed how these works approach NP as a text with its own capacity to provide social knowledge of some sort.

Furthermore, to obtain a fuller picture of the reception unauthorized by critical and scholarly authorities, I analyzed the comments on the online social media platform *GoodReads*. While ‘[m]ost readers have traditionally been voiceless among the formal institutions of literary culture, (...) Goodreads offers a platform to readers who have the confidence and literacy to write a public, permanent written book review’ (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo, 2019). Although the ‘datafication’ of the reading experiences undeniably serves as a fuel feeding the ‘algorithmic culture’ of corporate business (Murray, 2021), it also establishes ‘affinity spaces’ where ‘users can become engaged and gain authority in literary culture (...), thereby challenging existing social structures and hierarchies’ (Vlieghe et al., 2016: 28). Until 15 August 2023, NP obtained ratings from 1 195 091 users of whom 115 091 wrote a review. As I was interested in the converging aspects of reading experiences, I analyzed the top thirty (which equals the first page of the search) of the most popular one- to five-star reviews (i.e., 150 reviews in total). Lastly, the studied material navigated me to other types of media such as ‘booktubers’ (book-oriented influencers on YouTube), podcasts, and other social media

⁶ Most of the literary analyses are bachelor or master theses defended in English studies programs, where NP is analyzed simply as exercise material.

content, groups, and posts that I investigated in the sense of ‘social media as ethnographic sites’ (Wang and Liu, 2021). I was immersed in this field from December 2021 to July 2023.

Third, the reception analysis inevitably led me to assess the public persona of Rooney, who has been a crucial part of the novel’s paratexts heavily influencing the reception from the very beginning. I analyzed ten interviews with the author in the most-read online newspapers and magazines published between May 2018 (three months before NP was published) and June 2021 (three months before the publication of Rooney’s next novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You*).⁷ I also included a transcription of the most viewed interview on YouTube, which Rooney did for the London Review Bookshop (LRB, 2019). Essentially, I investigated the above-mentioned data surrounding the production and reception of NP to better understand how the novel itself manages to convey meanings akin to social theorizing, yet primarily via the iconic experience of reading induced by the novel’s aesthetic devices rather than the factual accounts of social experience. As I progressed through the studied material, I repeatedly re-read the novel paying special attention to how various reading strategies might relate to particular metaphors, narrative structuring, parallelisms, silences, innuendos, contradictions, and ambiguities in the text.

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⁷ These include *The Guardian*, *Esquire*, *Hazlitt*, *Oprah Daily*, *Elle*, *The New York Times*, *Vox*, *Interview Magazine*, *New Statesman*, and *The Telegraph*.

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