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**Class as a Constraint and
Renegotiation of Identities and Relations:
Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) and
Beautiful World, Where Are You (2021)**

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Abstract

This essay examines the role of class in Sally Rooney's novels *Normal People* (2018) and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021). The critical response to Sally Rooney's novel *Normal People* has focused on several aspects of the novel, such as how class and gender are portrayed and identity formation in recessionary Ireland, whereas literary criticism on *Beautiful World, Where Are You* has focused on other aspects of the novel, such as Rooney's use of modernist features. This essay analyses what role class plays in the characters' lives and relationships by applying sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social class to both novels. The key concepts that are used are Bourdieu's concepts "capital" (value), "habitus" (dispositions), and "field" (social space). This thesis incorporates the concept of field into the literary analysis, a key theoretical term largely overlooked in previous criticism, and emphasises its crucial role in understanding how different forms of capital are recognised and how habitus operates within specific social contexts. Within Bourdieu's framework of class, this essay argues that in Sally Rooney's *Normal People* and *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, class functions as a force that constrains characters' relationships and lives, as well as a process of transformation that compels them to redefine their identities and connections. In doing so, the thesis examines the ways in which class plays a major role in shaping the characters' lives and their claim to selfhood and agency in Rooney's novels.

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1. Introduction

Sally Rooney has gained widespread acclaim and popularity as a fiction and romance writer in the twenty-first century amongst the millennial generation of readers (Dwyer 1-2). This is because Rooney's characters, who are often young men and women entering adulthood, grapple with issues of love, identity, class, and the pressures of today's contemporary society, topics that are relevant and relatable to readers today (Barros-Del Rio 178). This essay examines what role class plays in Sally Rooney's novels *Normal People* and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* by applying Bourdieu's theory of social class. *Normal People* explores the evolving relationship between Marianne and Connell, two teenagers from different social backgrounds as they transition into adulthood. *Beautiful World, Where Are You* centres around the friendship between two women, Alice and Eileen, as well as the relationships they have with two men named Felix and Simon, as they reflect on love, class and meaning in a changing world. Drawing on Bourdieu's framework of class, this essay argues that in Sally Rooney's *Normal People* and *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, class functions both as a force that constrains characters' relationships and lives, and as a process of transformation that compels them to redefine their identities and connections.

Social class is hard to define precisely but can be understood as a process rather than a fixed state (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 100). In his influential work *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that class distinguishes itself through practices of distinction, operating through different forms of "capital" — economic, cultural, social, and symbolic — that shape individuals' positions within social space (100). Rooney deals with issues of class in both her novels, which focus not only on class in terms of economic wealth, but also considers the social, cultural, and symbolic aspects of class as well. Therefore, Bourdieu's theory about social class is relevant for Rooney's novels since this lens does much to enhance the nuanced understanding of the complex social issues that amount to class in the characters' lives.

The issue of class and gender has been examined and discussed in Rooney's novel *Normal People*. Literary critics, such as Barros-Del Rio, have written about *Normal People* and about the ways in which the characters' journeys towards independence and freedom in a Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland are affected by contemporary concerns regarding money, consumerism, and body commodification (176). These ideas in turn reveal the underlying issues of social inequality and how men and women are treated differently (176). Other critics have shown how the two main characters, Marianne and Connell, no longer see their different gender and class

backgrounds as problematic in their relationship (Ghassani et al. 194). Ghassani et al. have also focused on the role of power dynamics in the narrated relations between the fictional characters and on the question how the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of “capital” (value) and “habitus” (dispositions) affects the two main characters (200).

My essay, by contrast, extends the analysis of Ghassani et al., which is only based on Bourdieu's concepts of “capital” and “habitus”, to include another important concept: the “field” (social space). The concept of “field” is critical to include when discussing the concepts of “capital” and “habitus” because it is the structured social space in which these concepts operate, and the concept of “field” plays a large role in explaining different power relations amongst the characters in the novels. Furthermore, Rooney's novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You* has not been extensively written about in terms of class yet, neither from Bourdieu's perspective nor otherwise. However, the novel has been discussed in terms of how Rooney engages with modernism to examine social issues (Reynolds 2). Therefore, this essay can contribute to new knowledge about how class is discussed in *Beautiful World* through Bourdieu's sociological lens.

This essay applies Bourdieu's concepts of “capital”, “field”, and “habitus” to the novels. These concepts were chosen because they offer insight into the subtle and complex ways class impacts people's everyday lives, emphasising that class cannot just be understood based on economical differences. The sociological concepts in this literary analysis are mainly used from Bourdieu's book *Distinction*, as well as other articles and books written by him since they define and illustrate my chosen concepts clearly. The following part of the essay is a background section, which is divided into three subsections. Firstly, Sally Rooney as a writer and her work in contemporary fiction and romance is introduced, as well as explaining why the two novels were chosen. Secondly, Bourdieu's relevance to the literary field is also discussed to contextualise the use of his theory. Finally, in the third sub-section of the background, the main concepts used in this essay are defined.

Bourdieu's concepts of “capital”, “field”, and “habitus” are used to analyse the two main characters' relationship and identities in the novel *Normal People*. The analysis of *Beautiful World, Where Are You* uses Bourdieu's concepts of “capital”, “field”, and “habitus” by examining three of the characters in the novel and how their social class impacts their identities and relationships to one another. Each subsection of the two book analyses deals with Bourdieu's concepts separately, however, they are closely linked to each other so at times other concepts are mentioned as well. I have chosen to analyse these two novels separately since they

reflect how class is experienced at two different periods of life: late adolescence to early adulthood (*Normal People*) and early to mid-adulthood (*Beautiful World, Where Are You*). The analysis discusses how the characters navigate different “fields”, each governed by its own norms, forms of “capital”, and effects on the characters’ “habitus”. In *Normal People*, Marianne and Connell first navigate the social field at school and later in the novel they navigate the academic and literary field at university. In *Beautiful World*, the literary field is also discussed when examining two characters– Eileen and Alice – and their different positions of power in this field, which show tensions around power, recognition, and cultural legitimacy. Therefore, examining how the characters navigate different “fields” contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how “capital” and “habitus” function within these specific social contexts. Lastly, a conclusion summarises the main points of the essay and discusses the findings in relation to the thesis statement.

2. Background

2.1 Sally Rooney as a writer

Irish author Sally Rooney was originally from County Mayo but moved to Dublin to study at Trinity College. She gained widespread critical acclaim and praise for her novels *Conversations with Friends* (her debut novel published 2017), *Normal People*, and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (Barros-Del Río 177). According to Barros-Del Río, Rooney’s novels centre around young Irish men and women in today’s recessionary Ireland and reflect millennial struggles in an unstable and fast-paced world (178). Rooney’s novels often deal with issues of class, privilege, relationships and job insecurity which, at times, limit the characters’ possibilities and lives (178).

Her success and popularity are also due to her simple yet poignant writing style and narrative technique (Gerrard). In a manner similar to that of Jane Austen, she creates tension both through conversation and through what is not uttered in conversation (Gerrard). Barros-Del Río states that Rooney identifies as a feminist and Marxist yet her political opinions are not strongly expressed in her novels (177-178). However, her novels deal with the problem of how young people’s identity is expressed in a neo-liberal and recessionary discourse (177-178). In this essay, the analysis is based on the two chosen novels and not Rooney’s debut novel *Conversations with Friends*. This is because *Normal People* and *Beautiful World* illustrate how

class affects individuals at two distinct life stages: late adolescence to early adulthood (*Normal*) and early to mid-adulthood (*Beautiful*).

2.2 Bourdieu's sociology and relevance to literary studies

Given that this essay uses Bourdieu's theory of social class to analyse Rooney's novels, it is important to begin by discussing Bourdieu, his sociology, and his relevance for literary studies. Pierre Bourdieu is a French sociologist and public intellectual and his works are used in a variety of disciplines, such as anthropology, cultural studies, and linguistics (Speller 13). He was influenced by other sociologists such as Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim (Bourdieu, "Social Class" 3). Bourdieu criticised the opposition between constructivism and structuralism and instead asserted that social structures in society shape people (structuralism), and at the same time people actively contribute to reproducing or changing these structures through practices (1-2). One of Bourdieu's major works – *Distinction* – is an influential sociological study that examines the extent to which social class shapes individuals' tastes, lifestyles, and cultural preferences. *Distinction* has also been very influential in explaining social hierarchies and inequalities.

Bourdieu has also written about literature which has not been as extensively acknowledged. For example, Speller states that Bourdieu used literary themes in earlier works and one of the concepts that will be used in this essay – "field" – was developed through his literary studies (18). In addition, Speller states that there exists a relationship between literature and sociological theory because they both show representations of reality, albeit in different ways: "Thus, while sociological theory symbolises the structure of relations that determine and orient our practices, investments, and interests, literature (most obviously, the literature we call 'realist') shows these structures 'in action', in the form of concrete characters, with emotions, friendships, ambitions, and desires" (104). Sally Rooney is an author who exemplifies the ability of literature to show sociological structures 'in action'. She uses different forms and genres from literary traditions in her novels, among those realism and modernism, to show societal structures that limit the characters' lives (Reynolds 167-169). Rooney's writing can therefore be seen as sociological because she reflects broader, societal issues through her novels, as well as critically examining her role in these structures, which Bourdieu calls "reflexive sociology" (Vána 37-38). Therefore, it is relevant and informative to use sociological concepts to analyse Rooney's novels in this essay.

2.3 Key concepts

Bourdieu's *Distinction* is widely regarded as a classic in socio-cultural studies and contains several key concepts that this essay uses to show how class is represented in Rooney's novels. The first concept is "capital", which Bourdieu defines as four different types of power: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic ("Social Class" 4). The first form of "capital" is economic, which refers to an individual's wealth and is a form of value that can be converted into money (Bourdieu, "The Forms" 243). The second form of "capital" is cultural, which, Bourdieu argues, exists in three different forms: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalised state (243). The embodied state is the knowledge, skills, and habits an individual acquires over time, whereas the objectified state refers to physical items that represent cultural knowledge such as pictures and books (244-246). The institutionalised state is that which is recognised by society as legitimate, for example educational degrees and diplomas (247-248).

The third form of "capital" is social, which refers to an individual's social contacts and connections that can benefit them and open up new possibilities (Bourdieu, "The Forms" 248-249). The fourth form of "capital" is symbolic, which represents the other types of "capital" when they are considered legitimate (Bourdieu, "Social Class" 4). Individuals exist and are spread out in what Bourdieu describes as "a three-dimensional space" according to the overall volume and composition of their "capital", and how these two properties change over time (*Distinction* 108). Bourdieu writes that what constitutes social class divisions is based on groups of people with the most economic and cultural "capital", and those who have very little of the aforementioned "capital" (108). Individuals who are placed close to each other in this space are more likely to develop similar dispositions and practices (Bourdieu, "Social Class" 5-6).

The second concept this essay uses is "habitus", which Bourdieu describes as individuals' internalised dispositions that affect how they perceive, act, and think in the social world (*Distinction* 166). This in turn impacts the ways in which individuals view themselves compared to others, which contributes to class divisions and in turn reproduces lifestyles and practices within a class (167-168). As Bourdieu explains elsewhere: "Habitus thus implies a "sense of one's place" but also a "sense of the place of others" ("Social Class" 19). Bourdieu further notes that an individual's "habitus" can have an impact on relationships, and oftentimes individuals with similar "habitus" form attachments (5). It should be noted that even if an individual's social position improves (i.e., they accumulate more "capital"), their "habitus" will still impact how they think and behave in new social contexts (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 103).

Bourdieu also emphasises that “habitus” is a part of cultural “capital” that is embodied, and which is learnt within family socialisation (99).

The third and final concept used in this essay is “field”. It refers to a structured social space which has its own power dynamics, values and rules (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 107-108). Examples of “fields” are business fields, academic fields and medical fields, and Bourdieu also discusses how individuals can improve or lose status within a “field”, as well as how they can move between different ones (126). This happens through accumulation of “capital” required in the “field”, or by converting one type of “capital” into another (126). Bourdieu compares the concept to a “game”, whereby individuals compete for influence, status, and resources within each specific “field” (*Distinction* 107). The previous concepts – “capital” and “habitus” – play a significant role in the different “fields” because what type of “capital” and the amount an individual possesses varies depending on the “field”. An individual’s “habitus” thus affects how they navigate the different “fields” (107-108). In one of his books, *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu coined the term “social field” which he states is an autonomous “field” that has its own rules, norms, and logic which people are born into and not consciously aware of (67).

3. Analysis of *Normal People*

3.1 The concept of field: Marianne and Connell adhering to and rejecting the “rules of the game” in different social spaces

This concept is used when examining how Connell and Marianne navigate different social spaces and how their different social class positions affect their chances of succeeding. According to Bourdieu, fields have their own rules, values, and power dynamics (*Distinction* 107-108). The novel starts when Connell and Marianne are still in high school. Connell is popular and well-liked at school and praised for his talent and skill on the school’s football team (Rooney, *Normal* 11-12). Marianne, on the other hand, does not have any friends and is greatly disliked by many people, partly because “she exercises an open contempt for people in school” (2). From the very beginning, there is an undeniable attraction and connection between them which quickly turns into an intense romantic and sexual relationship (6-19). However, Connell cares a great deal about other people’s opinions of him and asks Marianne to keep their

relationship a secret (15). From the very beginning, therefore, their relationship is impacted and limited by social structures.

Without being explicitly stated, it is very clear that there exists a social hierarchy among the students at the school, which has its own values, norms and logic, and which affects Connell and Marianne's' possibilities to succeed. Connell and his friends are at the top of the "social ladder" and have high social status compared to Marianne who sees herself at the very bottom of it: "... their social lives are arranged hierarchically, with certain people at the top, some jostling at mid-level, and others lower down" (Rooney, *Normal* 29). Rooney also describes how Marianne sometimes thinks that she does not have a place on the "social ladder" at all and is therefore not affected by how the hierarchy works (29). Marianne does not desire popularity and does not understand what benefits or rewards people high up in the hierarchy attain (29). Therefore, Connell and Marianne have very different social positions at school, which affects their chances of gaining status and popularity.

This image of a "social ladder", where students are placed depending on their social status and popularity clearly exemplifies Bourdieu's concept of social field. Here, the accumulation of social capital (status and having the right social connections) is important in order to succeed in the social field at school (Rooney, *Normal* 29). Connell is high up in the hierarchy because he is friends with the dominant peer groups at school, which gives him influence and status (29). Therefore, when Connell starts a relationship with Marianne in secret, he is very aware of their different positions in the field and believes that his connection to her will jeopardize his own position (15). Marianne does not adhere to the rules, logic and norms of the social field at school, which values popularity and status, but she does not seem affected by this because she cannot see the benefits or rewards this social space offers (29). Whereas Connell strives to belong in this social space at school, Marianne on the other hand opposes the norms and values, which shows how she claims subjecthood and agency in her life and identity.

The concept of habitus is also relevant when examining Marianne and Connell's' chances of belonging in the social field at school. Marianne comes from an upper- class family in contrast to Connell who comes from a single-parent lower-class family. Indeed, Connell's mother works as a cleaner for Marianne's mother, a fact that Connell is conscious of (Rooney, *Normal* 1-2). Rob, one of his friends at school, remarks on this by saying that Marianne must see him as her "butler" and have a "little bell" to use (23). Rob also wonders how Marianne behaves at home and in her "natural habitat", which implies that Rob sees Marianne as belonging to a different social class than him and Connell (23). Therefore, Rob and Marianne

have different habitus that impact, for example, how Rob views himself in relation to Marianne, which reinforces class divisions.

This in turn explains why Connell's friends dislike Marianne and why she does not have a high-ranking position in the social field at school. Connell and his friends have the same habitus and social class background, which means that they form groups at school with people sharing the same habitus as them (Rooney, *Normal* 23). Marianne does not have the same habitus that benefits her in this social field, which impacts her position and status at school (23). Marianne's social class background and dispositions therefore impact her chances of belonging and integrating at school.

As the novel progresses and Marianne and Connell start studying at Trinity College, their positions are reversed and now Connell finds it difficult to belong at university. Connell finds it hard to make friends, compared to Marianne who is popular and can easily converse with people at university (Rooney, *Normal* 72). This is largely because most of the people at Trinity College are described as upper-class and therefore have similar habitus and practices as Marianne (70-72). Thus, as Bourdieu states, a person's habitus impacts how they navigate different fields and find belonging (Bourdieu, "Social Class" 5). Ultimately, Connell's and Marianne's different class backgrounds impact their chances of finding belonging with others at university.

It is clear that cultural capital (cultural knowledge) and social capital (social connections) are a significant determinant of a person's ability to succeed and find belonging in the academic field at university. Connell remarks on the way his peers state their opinions with force and straightforwardness compared to the shy way he expresses his thoughts and opinions, which at first makes him feel intellectually inferior to them (Rooney, *Normal* 67). However, during seminars Connell gradually notices that the classroom discussions are very abstract and that his peers do not support their claims with textual evidence (68). Hence, Connell realises that his classmates strive to appear intellectual and knowledgeable on the surface because that will earn them prestige and influence in the academic field (68). Therefore, Connell observes the forms of capital which are important to acquire in order to succeed in the academic field at university.

At university, Connell behaves differently from his peers yet at the same time strives to form an identity that his peers will accept. He studies and reads a great deal and receives high grades, but he does not boast about this or feel intellectually superior to his peers (Rooney, *Normal* 68, 99). Nonetheless, it is important for him that others see him as intelligent

because that gives him influence and prestige in the academic field (68-99). It gives him an identity his peers can understand: "... and he finds he likes to be thought of as intelligent, if only because it makes his interactions with other people more legible" (99). This passage shows Connell's struggle to navigate this new field and form an identity that is acceptable within it (99). At the same time, this passage also reflects social class differences since Connell does not have the same habitus as his peers, which impacts his sense of belonging in this field and his identity (99). Ultimately, this shows how Connell's identity and sense of belonging and acceptance at university is constrained by class.

Connell's lower-class and Marianne's upper-class backgrounds influence how they behave at university and shape what they consider important and valuable, as shown during the scholarship exams. Receiving the scholarship will pay for the student's tuition, housing on campus, and free meals in the evenings with other scholars (Rooney, *Normal* 138). For Connell, the scholarship "is a gigantic material fact" which means that he no longer needs to worry about paying rent and that he can do a postgraduate program for free (159). Marianne took the scholarship exams simply to distinguish herself as intelligent. Since she has grown up in an upper-middle class family, Marianne does not have to think about financial matters in the same way Connell does (138). This demonstrates her lack of awareness concerning her privileged social position (138). Marianne also tries to improve her cultural capital (cultural knowledge) by taking the scholarship exams with the intention of getting her "superior intellect" approved by others, in order for her to gain influence and prestige in the academic field (138). Therefore, Marianne and Connell value the scholarship differently, which highlights their respective social class backgrounds.

Symbolic capital is another type of capital that is important to discuss here. According to Bourdieu, this is when the other types of capital are considered legitimate ("Social Class" 4). In this case, for both Marianne and Connell, their academic knowledge (cultural capital) is converted into symbolic capital, and by receiving the scholarship they both gain institutional recognition in the academic field at university (Rooney, *Normal* 138). Ultimately, Marianne's and Connell's respective social class backgrounds show that they navigate the academic field in different ways and therefore value the rewards of the scholarship dissimilarly (138-159). Yet, the scholarship is a form of symbolic capital that both Marianne and Connell highly value (138). In this context therefore, class functions as a force that constrains how Marianne and Connell act in their lives, and one which determines what is important to them.

3.2 The concept of habitus: proximity and distance between different social classes

This concept is clearly linked to the way people perceive and behave towards Connell and, conversely, how Connell perceives others at university, which contributes to distance between different social classes. Bourdieu states that the concept of habitus implies a “sense of one’s place” but also a “sense of the place of others”, and this is clearly shown in the upcoming passage (“Social Space” 19). Whilst attending a party, Connell instantly feels like an outsider and different compared to the other students who come from a higher social class: “He feels as if everyone around him is disturbed by his presence and trying not to stare” (Rooney, *Normal* 66). This passage exemplifies Connell’s perception of being different compared to the other students, whereby he feels inferior to them and feels that he does not belong at the party with them (66). Therefore, Connell’s perception of himself as different from his peers contributes to the reproduction of class distinctions and influences how his identity is formed at university.

The concept of habitus is also shown from Marianne’s perspective when she observes and reacts to how her friends at university, especially her male friends, perceive Connell and behave towards him. Marianne observes how the men “have not warmed to him in the same way” and only socialise with Connell because he is friends with her (Rooney, *Normal* 89). Marianne defends Connell by exclaiming that he is smarter than she is, even though he does not boast about the number of books he has read, or his knowledge of wars in history (89). This shows that Marianne is aware that her friends, especially her male friends, behave differently towards Connell because he is not from the same social class background as they are.

Differences in upbringing also impacts how people think and behave. As previously mentioned, Bourdieu states that habitus is also a part of cultural capital (habits, skills) that is embodied, and which is learnt from primary socialisation (*Distinction* 99). Marianne and the other students think and behave in ways that are different from Connell because they were raised in upper-middle class families (Rooney, *Normal* 89). Connell was not raised under similar circumstances as them and therefore behaves in ways that are different, which the other male students dislike (89). Habitus can therefore impact who people choose to like or dislike, and a person is more likely to form relationships with people who have the same habitus (Bourdieu, “Social Class” 5). This illustrates that, despite Marianne’s different habitus, she does not allow their different social class backgrounds to negatively shape her view of Connell or their relationship.

Another passage from the novel exemplifies how Connell also does not see his and Marianne's different social class backgrounds as problematic in their relationship. The concept of habitus is shown when Connell's mother, Lorraine, questions Connell about his relationship with Marianne (Rooney, *Normal* 50-51). Lorraine asks whether Connell's hesitation to define the relationship is based on the fear that Marianne's mother will not approve of their connection, since Marianne's mother might deem Connell "beneath her station" (50-51). Connell becomes shocked and angry when hearing this because he had not thought about it in the same way (50-51). Lorraine's statements about Marianne's mother show her perceptions and opinions about the upper-class, as well as how she positions herself in relation to them (50-51). Presuppositions about social class differences are easily transferred to the next generation and in turn uphold class divisions (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 167- 168). However, Connell's response indicates that he rejects the notion that social class should limit personal or romantic connections, and therefore Connell and Marianne's relationship transcends class differences.

3.3 The concept of capital: valued resources in social spaces and the possibility for Connell to redefine his identity

The concept of capital has already been mentioned in the discussion about field. This section will elaborate further upon this concept and demonstrate how certain types of capital are significant in specific fields, and how this compels Connell to redefine his identity. When Connell attends a reading at the university, he observes how commodified the entire event feels (Rooney, *Normal* 218-219). He reflects upon the significance such readings have for the author as well as for the audience: "Everything about the event was staid and formulaic, sapped of energy ... Connell couldn't think of any reason why these literary events took place, what they contributed to anything, what they meant. They were attended only by people who wanted to be the kind of people who attended them" (218- 219). The passage suggests that Connell does not deem the reading as genuine and instead believes it benefits writers' profit and status in the literary field (218-219). Thus, Connell critiques how literature is commodified and lacks authentic meaning in the literary field.

Connell further critiques the reading's importance for the audience members. The reading is also of benefit to the audience members who wish to appear "cultured" and who strive to accumulate cultural capital (cultural knowledge, skills) in the academic and literary field (Rooney, *Normal* 218-219). This is further exemplified by Connell's observation that the

reading is: “Culture as class performance, literature fetishised for its ability to take educated people on false emotional journeys, so that they might afterwards feel superior to the uneducated people whose emotional journeys they liked to read about” (221). This shows that Connell is aware of the performative aspect of class and that the “educated people” do not read literature purely for its aesthetic or emotional meaning, but for its function as cultural capital that confers status in both the literary and academic field (221).

Furthermore, this shows how the literary field values and adheres to the preferences of the “educated class”. This is because readings at Connell’s university, for example, function as a means for the “educated class” to display their interpretive skills (Rooney, *Normal* 221). This passage also indicates that the concept of habitus plays a role in the literary and academic field, whereby the “educated people” view themselves as superior to the “uneducated people” and in turn reinforces class divisions (221). Ultimately, Connell’s critical observations of the literary and academic fields not only expose the performative and exclusionary nature of class within these spaces, but also leads him to redefine his own identity and relationship to these social spaces by distancing himself from the behaviours and values they promote.

Connell recognises the importance of attaining cultural capital in the literary field but disagrees with the way people seek to get it, which compels him to redefine his identity in relation to this field. Connell has a great passion for writing and wants to succeed in the literary field and gain cultural capital, but he finds other ways of doing so (Rooney, *Normal* 245-246). This is exemplified when, for the first time, he sends one of his short stories to the editor of the college literary journal and asks that it be published under a pseudonym, and that no one discovers that he wrote the story (245-246). His request to remain anonymous can partly be attributed to his low self-esteem, yet it is also apparent that Connell does not want to flaunt his literary talent or seek validation (symbolic capital) in the literary field (245-246). Therefore, Connell does not adhere to the dominant logic of the literary field, which values symbolic capital, visibility, and cultural performance (245-246). Ultimately, Connell defines his identity in relation to the literary field that often commodifies emotional depth and cultural capital and seeks to establish a more authentic and ethically driven relationship to literature.

4. Analysis of *Beautiful World, Where Are You*

4.1 The concept of field: Alice's alienation in, and Eileen's ambivalence to, the literary field

Despite Alice's success and recognition as a novelist, her initial origins continue to shape her, creating a sense of dislocation and prompting a critical view of the elite literary field she now is a part of. Alice's symbolic capital – her wealth and acclaim as a novelist – has enabled her upward mobility, whereby she now belongs to the elite literary field (Rooney, *Beautiful* 87). However, despite the influence and recognition, Alice feels deeply alienated in the elite literary field she now belongs to, which is due to her initially belonging to a lower social class (94-96). Therefore, Alice's habitus from her initial social origins is not fully aligned in the elite field she now belongs to.

Despite Alice's high status as a novelist in the literary field, she feels deeply alienated in it. In her emails to Eileen, Alice often writes about how she greatly dislikes the fame and public attention that surrounds her as a well-known novelist (Rooney, *Beautiful* 54). In addition, she often criticises the literary world for its commodification of authors and literature, whereby Alice feels like “product” instead of a person in the literary field (94-96). This again indicates that she feels alienated in the literary field she now circulates in and, even though she possesses symbolic capital (recognition, fame), she critiques the field from within and rejects its values (94- 95). This is also a clear example that although her habitus has shifted, it is still not fully aligned and at home in this new field (94-95). Therefore, Alice's habitus remains shaped by her initial origins and that causes her to not fully adapt to the new field she circulates in (94-95). Thus, class acts as a constraint that shapes Alice's identity and at the same time compels her to redefine her identity by rejecting what is valued in the literary field.

Eileen also belongs to and navigates the literary field, but she occupies a lower position in the field than Alice. Eileen works as an editorial assistant at a literary magazine and is paid very little, and compared to Alice she does not have the same amount and quality of capital and is therefore positioned lower in the literary field (Rooney, *Beautiful* 73). For instance, although Eileen has cultural capital in the sense that she is intellectual, well-read, and is an editorial assistant, she does not possess a lot of symbolic capital (210-211). In contrast to Alice, her job does not grant her public recognition (symbolic capital) since her job is about curating and supporting other people's work (60). Therefore, Eileen and Alice have different positions of power within this field because they possess different amount and types of capital.

Eileen has an ambivalent attitude towards the literary field. Through her and Alice's email exchanges, it is evident that Eileen both wants to succeed and improve her position within the literary field by, for example, publishing a book, but at the same time she is critical of the fame and publicity that Alice must face (Rooney, *Beautiful* 210-211). For example, in an email exchange with Alice, it is evident that Eileen envies Alice's fame and privileged position when she compares their lives (73). Ultimately, Eileen and Alice's friendship is shaped by their different positions in the literary field and the competition for status, value, and recognition, which in turn affects the dynamics of their relationship and Eileen's feelings towards Alice.

4.2 The concept of habitus: Alice escaping her past origins and redefining her identity and relationship

Despite Alice's upward mobility and accumulation of capital, she remains shaped by her initial origins, resulting in both a sense of disconnection from her past and a redefined identity in her present. What is interesting with Alice's habitus is that even though her economic, social, and cultural capital has increased, she was initially raised with less privilege than she has now (Rooney, *Beautiful* 187). This is apparent in an email she writes to Eileen where she discusses the difference between her new social class position and that of her parents:

All my mania for culture ... what if it's all a form of vanity, or even worse, a little bandage over the initial wound of my origins? I have put between myself and my parents such a gulf of sophistication that it's impossible for them to touch me now or to reach me at all. And I look back across that gulf, not with a sense of guilt or loss, but with relief and satisfaction ... But I am different, and I don't understand them very well, and I can't live with them or draw them into my inner world – or for that matter write about them. (187)

Firstly, this passage shows that Alice reflects on why she values culture so much and that she questions whether it has to do with her vanity (187). However, her fear that it is linked to the "initial wound of my origins" illustrates that Alice's wealth and status as a writer is merely a "bandage" to hide her feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, which come from being raised with less privilege than others (187). This passage indicates that external success, or social mobility, cannot fully alter or change a person's habitus (187). This explains the alienation Alice feels in the elite literary field since she was initially raised with less privilege.

Secondly, this passage shows that Alice feels shame over her initial origins. The passage indicates that she consciously tried to distance herself from her parents by accumulating cultural capital (Rooney, *Beautiful* 187). She describes this as “a gulf of sophistication,” positioning herself apart from her parents within Bourdieu’s three-dimensional space, which differentiates individuals based on their possession of capital (187). Thus, this passage reflects Alice’s awareness and mixed feelings about her privileged position.

The passage also shows that Alice acknowledges that her identity and life has changed. Alice states that she feels “relief and satisfaction” because of that distance now and acknowledges that she feels that her identity and her life have changed now that she circulates in elite, literary circles (Rooney, *Beautiful* 187). This clearly shows that, although Alice acknowledges that her pursuit of cultural capital is a deliberate act to distance herself from her upbringing, this change has altered her habitus so that she no longer feels similarities and connection with her parents (187). This shift in Alice’s habitus also explains the tension in her relationship with Felix because he embodies the social class she has distanced herself from and which she now finds difficult to relate to (48-49). Ultimately, Alice’s reflection shows the paradox of class: it constrains her life by making her feel inherent shame over her past origins. Yet, it also functions as a force that has resulted in a new identity and social class position for her.

Despite Alice’s new social class position and shift in habitus, her and Felix’s honest and meaningful relationship is also due to Alice feeling more comfortable with people who share the same social codes and ingrained dispositions as her. This is exemplified when Alice tells Eileen about her relationship with Felix: “... There are no boundaries or conventions by which our relationship is constrained ... What makes it different in other words is neither him nor me ... but the method by which we relate to one another – or the absence of method” (Rooney, *Beautiful* 93). Firstly, this passage shows that Alice feels that their relationship is not limited by anything; there are “no boundaries or conventions” (93). This indicates that Alice does not view their different social class positions as a problem in their relationship.

Secondly, Alice explains that she feels a natural ease and connection to Felix. Alice explains that what makes their relationship different and meaningful lies in the “method” or “absence of method” in how they interact and relate to one another, which shows that despite a change in her habitus and social class position, she still feels a natural ease and connection to Felix (Rooney, *Beautiful* 93). This is linked to Bourdieu stating that an individual’s habitus decides who you feel affinity and belonging with, and who you feel discomfort and distance

from (“Social Class” 5). Therefore, Alice’s habitus greatly plays a role in Alice’s feelings towards Felix.

Alice’s habitus has become adaptable to the elite, literary field she now belongs to yet her initial origins continue to shape her and her choice of relationships. Bourdieu mentions that a person’s habitus impact people’s choices of relationships (“Social Class” 5). Therefore, even though Alice’s upward mobility in the cultural elite has caused her habitus to transform and become adaptable to new social contexts, her deeply ingrained dispositions from her past origins still impact where and who she feels belonging with (Rooney, *Beautiful* 93). Ultimately, class functions both as a constraint and a process of transformation in Alice’s life: while it influences who she forms relationships with, her connection to Felix does not signal a complete rejection of her origins, but rather a merging of past and present identities.

4.3 The concept of capital: power struggles for valued resources in social spaces and how it shapes identities and relationships

Alice and Eileen have a close friendship but there exists underlying tension between them, which is based on their possession of different types of capital. Due to Alice’s popularity, influence, and wealth as novelist, she has accumulated a lot of capital in all its forms (Rooney, *Beautiful* 54-55). Alice has a lot of economic capital (wealth), which she has earned from her novels and a form of elite social capital through her literary network as a novelist (265). She has also acquired the institutionalised type of cultural capital in the form of literary credentials and refined literary taste, as well as the embodied type of cultural capital in the form of refined literary preferences (265). Lastly, Alice has symbolic capital due to her status and recognition as a well-known novelist (265).

Eileen differs greatly compared to Alice in terms of possessing the different types of capital. Eileen works as a low-paid editorial assistant at a literary magazine in Dublin and therefore does not have the same amount and forms of capital as Alice (Rooney, *Beautiful* 73). In an email exchange with Alice, Eileen tells her about an agent in London who had read an essay she wrote several years ago and asked her if she was planning on writing a novel (210). Eileen confesses that she did not tell Alice about this at the time because she presumed that Alice would be busy and because “it seemed like something small” compared to everything happening in Alice’s life (210). This exemplifies Eileen’s sense of inferiority to Alice given Alice’s popularity and status as a writer (210). Therefore, there exists underlying tension in Eileen and Alice’s interactions which is based on them possessing different types of capital.

Due to this difference in capital, Eileen views Alice as a “competitor” in the power struggle for influence and status in the literary field. This is shown in an email to Alice, in which Eileen admits she doubted her intellectual ability to write a book and could not understand why she would even attempt it (Rooney, *Beautiful* 210-211). She even wondered whether it was because she wanted to feel “equal” to Alice (211). Ultimately, the struggle for capital and desire to improve one’s status and influence in the literary field shapes Eileen’s identity and self-worth, as well as creating tension in her relationship with Alice.

Class also functions as a force that allows Eileen to redefine her identity and relationship to Alice. As previously shown, Alice and Eileen’s relationship is subtly influenced by class tensions, which causes Eileen to feel inferior to Alice (Rooney, *Beautiful* 210-211). However, Eileen reflects over and acknowledges this sense of inferiority to Alice by stating: “I’m sorry if this is all making it sound like you loom large over my inner life. You don’t usually, or if you do it’s in a good way” (211). In this passage, Eileen acknowledges that she sometimes sees herself as inferior to Alice and expresses a desire not to let this feeling come between them (210–211). Thus, Eileen reflects on this sense of inferiority and begins to confront the class-based tension in their relationship.

Yet, at the same time, Eileen sees this inferiority as positive. This is because she has a high regard and admiration for Alice, both as a close friend and as a well-known writer (Rooney, *Beautiful* 210-211). Also, Eileen’s comments that Alice does not “loom large”, or if so, only “in a good way”, indicates that she attempts not to let Alice and their different social class positions define her identity and self-worth (210-211). Therefore, despite tension in their relationship, which is based on differences in capital, their meaningful friendship with one another allows them to transcend this social divide and allows Eileen to redefine her identity in relation to her class position.

The romantic relationship between Felix and Alice is shaped by class-based tension, which constrains their ability to connect, yet also enables them to redefine their relationship. Compared to Alice's occupation and interest in cultural phenomenon, Felix works in a warehouse and does not have the same interest in culture and literature as she does (Rooney, *Beautiful* 5, 87). Using Bourdieu’s three-dimensional space, Felix and Alice are positioned very differently in this social space, because Felix does not possess the same wealth (economic capital), cultural knowledge and intellectual ways of behaving (cultural capital), social connections (social capital), and recognition (symbolic capital) as Alice (5). Thus, their

different positions in this social space indicate that they have quite different interests, behaviour, and opinions, which later in the novel creates tension between them.

A passage from the novel illustrates the underlying class tension between them. After meeting at the supermarket, Felix invites Alice to a party he is hosting at his house (Rooney, *Beautiful* 44). When Alice arrives, one of his friends asks her what she does for a living, and she replies that she is a novelist (47). When Felix and his friends discover that she is a famous novelist, Felix shows apparent unease, intimidation, and prejudice towards Alice: “You must think you’re very special” (49). It is clear from Felix’s comment that he is envious and intimidated by Alice’s success in her literary career, and his comment also implies that he believes that Alice feels superior to him (49). This is again because Alice possesses types of capital that differ significantly from his. Therefore, difference in capital creates tension in their relationship and constrains their emotional connection.

However, the tension in their relationship is overcome by their honest and genuine ways of interacting with one another. For example, already early in the novel Alice reveals to Felix that she was in hospital a few months previously because she had a serious nervous breakdown (Rooney, *Beautiful* 51). Ultimately, Felix and Alice’s honest communication and mutual understanding bridges class divides, revealing how class, while a constraint, also functions to reshape and transform the nature of their relationship.

There is another instance in the novel which highlights the difference in capital between Alice and Felix and the effect that has on their relationship and their identities. In an interview, a journalist asks Alice what her partner thinks of her novels and Alice replies that he has never read them (Rooney, *Beautiful* 327). Afterwards, Felix receives a lot of negative comments from people on the internet who shame him for never reading Alice’s novels, and the comments have an undertone of prejudice about Felix’s social class position and character (327). This shows that Felix does not possess the same cultural capital as Alice, and society judges him harshly for it (327). However, Felix and Alice remain unbothered by these online comments and do not let it impact their relationship in a negative way (327). Ultimately, this illustrates how their emotional connection again transcends class and cultural divides, showing that differences in capital and social status do not determine their identities or their relationship.

5. Conclusion

This essay has shown that class, as viewed from Bourdieu's perspective, is a force that functions both as a constraint on the characters' lives and relationships, but also as a process of transformation that compels them to redefine their identities and relationships. In *Normal People*, Marianne and Connell, who originate from different social classes, are constrained by class in terms of how they think and behave in different fields, and furthermore by how their "habiti" impact their chances of acquiring capital and succeeding in these fields.

However, in different ways, Marianne and Connell are aware of the limitations that class imposes on their lives and instead challenge the dominant logic and rules in the different fields. For example, when Marianne does not conform to the social field at school by not trying to acquire social status and popularity, and when Connell redefines his identity outside the literary field. Marianne and Connell also do not allow their different social class backgrounds to negatively impact their feelings to each other and their relationship. Marianne's relationship with Connell, for example, forces her to challenge perceptions about social class differences (that many of her upper-class friends have), in turn overcoming class divisions.

In *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, differences in capital and habitus and their positions in different fields create tension in the characters' relationships and impacts their identities. For example, Eileen feels inferior to Alice because she does not possess the same capital and position in the literary field. This shapes Eileen's identity and self-worth as well as her feelings towards Alice. Alice, on the other hand, struggles with her identity as a globally successful novelist because her habitus is not fully aligned with the elite literary field she now circulates in. However, the characters reflect on these feelings of inferiority or alienation, which helps them redefine their identities and relationships to one another. For example, despite Felix and Alice's different social class positions, their honest and open communication enables them to bridge the divide in class and culture and redefine the nature of their relationship. This aligns with Bourdieu's view that social structures in society both shape and constrain people's lives, yet do not absolutely determine identity or agency, and consequently people can change these structures through practices (Bourdieu, "Social Class" 1- 2).

Therefore, both of Rooney's novels show how class constrains characters' identities and relationships yet also acts as a force that transforms and redefines them. This thesis has also highlighted the importance of including the concept of field into literary analysis because the characters' identities and connections are shaped and redefined through the interplay between habitus, forms of capital, and different norms and conventions of the fields

they navigate. This essay offers a basis for further research to examine how class is represented in Rooney's other works, especially regarding Bourdieu's theory of social class.

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