

Performing the Self in Social Arenas: A Dramaturgical Analysis of Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018). The renowned Irish author is praised for her exploration of millennial relationships. The research employs a qualitative method, utilising Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach from a social-psychological perspective. The significance of the study lies in applying the dramaturgical approach, which conceptualises the protagonist's navigation of self-presentation, social behaviours, and internal struggles in different social settings. The transition of self-image and social performance across social situations is analysed. This paper examines the protagonist's dual behaviour, which is characterised by the son of a working-class woman and an intellectual student at an elite university. Study of the central figure's front-stage and back-stage behaviour emphasises the underlying conflict between the authentic self and the socially constructed self, which seeks social validation. Role performance and impression management are evaluated in various social settings. The breakdown of performance is evaluated to examine the transformation of the character. Therefore, this research illustrates the performance aspect of social identity in literature.

Keywords: Social psychology; self; social situation; performance

FULL PAPER

Introduction

Social Psychology provides a deeper exploration of an individual's identities, behaviours and relationships influenced by social settings and interactions. The situational influence in this field reveals that a person can adapt their attitude, expression and behaviour according to the social expectations within the social setting. This idea can be observed in schools, colleges, homes, public, and private spaces. The study of setting-based attitude or behaviour in social psychology emphasises not only a deeper understanding of social interaction but also its influence on the human mind and life. In literature, this framework depicts the convulsions of the human mind by analysing the ways characters alter their public and private selves in a social setting. The character development, symbolic settings, and narrative techniques depict the change in attitude across different social settings in his life. The social setting encompasses both the physical and social environments that serve as a backdrop in the narrative, where authors employ multi-layered narrative techniques to portray the literary character's transformation, adapting to and resisting certain social expectations and influences. This exploration in literature not only mirrors real-world social psychology but also provides intense insights into the human mind, identity, and self-image.

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) is a coming-of-age novel that skillfully captures the multifaceted actions of its characters through the emotional and social complexities of the interpersonal relationship between the protagonist, Marianne Sheridan, and Connell Waldron. The novel explores the character's oscillation between their front-stage focus on class differences, social validation, and impression management, and their backstage performances, shaped by emotional vulnerability, emotional detachment, and self-doubt. This paper highlights Connell Waldron's life journey and its complexities. In his School days in his hometown of Carricklea, he was a famous, handsome, and intelligent student, introverted in public spaces, from a working-class background. He maintains a clandestine relationship with Marianne, a socially ostracised girl in his school from an upper-class background. He fears social judgment from his school's social groups, which makes him maintain his relationships in private spaces.

Trinity College in Dublin serves as a second social setting that erodes his self-esteem and social confidence due to its elite atmosphere. He utilises his intellect and high interest in literary criticism to secure his position in the university. He seeks social identity with dignity. He seeks social mobility through education, but the complexities of class mobility make him feel out of place. This forces him to take up different roles in different settings.

Methodology & Discussion

This research paper employs a qualitative method and textual analysis, analysing the study through the Dramaturgical approach of Erving Goffman. The

prominent social psychologist Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, as presented in his famous work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), provides a theoretical framework for exploring an individual's role performance and negotiation of identities in different social contexts. He represents the social interaction of an individual as a theatrical performance, where a person projects themselves in different shades according to the setting. This approach offers a nuanced analysis of Connell Waldron's character within the narrative, as his character is shaped by his social performances, impression management, and self-presentation in social settings. This theory suggests that an individual's identity is not fixed, but rather a series of role performances, making the novel a profound portrayal of social influence and self-image.

According to Goffman (1959), people automatically exert a moral influence when they project a meaning of the situation and thus make an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular type. He explains that there is no single, authentic identity for an individual, and people often play multiple roles in their lives. Human beings play different roles in different social situations in their lives. This clarifies that people do not have a single, authentic self and that there is no single, unified identity. The performance in the social setting shapes our identity. People seek social validation for their role identities and often become disappointed by failures and unmet social expectations. Everyone tries to perform according to the setting, deciding on their actions and performance, and evaluating their performance based on the feedback from the audience.

Impression Management:

It is the conscious or unconscious process by which an individual regulates their self-presentation to influence other's perception of them. This includes specific strategies, such as body language, appearance, and controlling speech and expressions, that create a favourable impression about them in the minds of others. This suggests that individuals in a social group will behave like actors on a stage, performing specific roles in response to the social setting and audience. Impression management plays a significant role in the dramaturgical approach, where front-stage and backstage role performances are analysed.

Front Stage vs Back Stage Performance:

Front Stage Behaviour- Public Self:

This narrative captures the multi-layered role performances of the protagonist in each social setting and period. The performances include front and backstage performances in a social setting. Every stage has two sides: the backstage area, where preparations and rehearsals are done, and the stage itself, where the actual performance occurs in front of an audience. "Front" refers to the aspect of a performer's performance that consistently defines the situation for those watching in a general and fixed manner. Conversely, "backstage" describes an area where unprofessional conduct occurs. There are two areas in life as well, and each has its

own set of standards for behaviour. The narrative reveals a transition in the life of the main lead. Goffman asserts that every social event has a dramatic quality. People always try to make a positive impression on others because their overall demeanour and general appearance are essential for the identity that they aim to portray.

In School, Connell performs the role of a famous school athlete, class topper and introvert. He maintains his position among his high school classmates. He desires social validation from his peers, which compels him to conform to the expectations of a social group. Marianne is not a familiar person in school, and her peers mock her for being aloof and lacking social interaction. She is not involved in unnecessary gossip, which makes her stand out positively in school. To maintain his privilege and social attention, he distances himself from Marianne, his classmate and lover in school. He fears social judgment, which affects his self-image. It is believed that the characters' roles represent the messages they convey, and the script is the information we use to interact with others. The roles are being carried out in a manner that will lead the audience, who are the performance's observers, to believe in what is being performed before them.

At Trinity College, the main lead enters a new environment with distinct features. The students at the university are from highly influential backgrounds, often from the privileged upper class. He assumes the role of an intellectual persona that reflects a sense of social mobility, and he attempts to conceal his working-class origins by presenting himself as an intelligent student through engaging in literary discussions with insightful thoughts and commentary on society. He adopts a reserved and observant demeanour to avoid social rejection and discomfort. He is content with an image of quiet normalcy rather than participating in other social performances. He maintains passivity and self-effacement by taking on the role of an observer rather than seeking attention. His introversion makes him distant from others in a group of socially superior peers. He hides his internal conflicts and complexities in his mind. He posits as an observer. He façades himself against emotional vulnerability in public space, depicting himself with detached politeness rather than warmth or intimacy. He continues to struggle with self-control and remains detached from his relationship with Marianne in university life. He avoids a public display of affection with Marianne. Social anxiety and self-consciousness serve as a source in unfamiliar social settings. He is not involved in other characters without any purpose. Inferiority over his class identity makes him feel assertive in public spaces. His role as a responsible son portrays him as a polite and dutiful individual, which leads him to avoid expressing negative emotions about his financial crisis. He does not want to burden his mother and others with his financial struggles. In the adult world, in his professional self, he assumes the role of a self-reliant employee with responsibility. His career choice adds to his professional identity.

Backstage Behaviour- Private Self:

Connells reveals his vulnerable side to Marianne without any fear of judgment. He expresses his true self without any façade in between. An individual

brings out his unfiltered emotions backstage.“ Lately, he is consumed by a sense that he is two separate people, and soon he will have to choose which person to be on a full-time basis and leave the other person behind” (Rooney,2018, p.23)

His intimate relationship with Marianne provides a backstage performance, where he feels comfortable sharing his inner thoughts and emotions without any fear. He realises that he cannot perform two roles at the same time, and he should choose one role in their life to progress. His tenderness and insecurities about his class identity, as well as other financial struggles at university, are unveiled to Marianne backstage. The anxious and nervous side of Connell is expressed in the private space. When he hears the news of his school friend Rob's suicide, he is heartbroken and disheartened. He was frustrated and confused, feeling a deep sorrow. He could interact socially with his peers and isolate himself to cope with the sorrow.

Connell's insecurity and backstage anxiety are revealed at the university because of his working-class background. He has intense self-doubt and negative self-impression. He played the role of a reserved character on stage at university, and backstage, he felt like an impostor in his elite social group. When his peers planned international trips, summer internships, and club activities for their vacations, he performed as a silent observer. He has an emotional detachment and never wants to socialise backstage. He focuses on social alienation. In university, he prefers part-time jobs and spending time alone in his room, reading novels. He desires solitude in his backstage performance. He feels that it is a coping mechanism for his heartbreak, which he has undergone. Backstage unveils his authentic self, where his emotional vulnerability, internal conflicts and self-doubt.

Sign Vehicles:

Sign Vehicles are the strategies that people use to communicate information about themselves during social interaction with others in a social setting. It involves speech, body language and emotional impression. In school, Connell uses Sligo's accent as a means of speech to fit into the social group, and he feels that he needs to downplay his intellectual capabilities to conform to his peers. He often employs emotional detachment and a dismissive manner to avoid social attention that might impact his relationship with Marianne. On the other hand, at Trinity College, his sense of insecurity about his class difference is significantly high, which makes him more reserved, and this adds to his language. He uses a refined and formal tone of speech at university to fit into the intellectual group. He modulates his accent and vocabulary to avoid a sense of alienation. He uses restrained verbal expression and maintains a calm, inexpressive manner, even in vulnerable circumstances.

The main lead's body language is composed of non-verbal cues that create an impression of how others perceive him. It involves facial expression, posture and physical gestures to reflect his efforts to maintain a controlled self-image. He employs a closed and defensive body language that conceals his emotional

vulnerability. He maintains a stoic facial expression, devoid of physical gestures that could reveal his emotional connection to Marianne. He suppresses his emotions with a rigid posture and limited physical affection in public spaces.

Connell's oscillation in the emotional expression towards his loved one in different spaces. In some instances, Marianne and Connell had an emotional breakdown, where he maintained a stoic demeanour on stage and façade his sorrow. When he experiences depression, he gives raw and unfiltered emotions in the therapy session. He exhibits emotional inconsistency as a form of impression management, which showcases his self-image.

Props and Setting:

In the dramaturgical approach, props are objects used by individuals to enhance their social performance on stage. This reveals their personal identity and social perception, as well as their influence in the social setting. Connell's clothing serves as a symbol of class and identity, reflecting his working-class background. He tries to either blend into the social group or distance himself from his fellow students, depending on the situation. At Trinity College, he observes his university students' clothing and dress sense, which creates a low self-image and makes him feel insecure about his inexpensive, cheap-looking clothes paired with tattered sneakers. "At the same time, it forces him to acknowledge that his clothes are cheap and unfashionable" (Rooney, 2018, p.54). His simple outfits widely contrast with those of the elite fashionistas at the university, representing a class difference that causes a sense of alienation among his peers. This dress sense and choice of clothes serve as a prop that emphasises the visual narrative of his journey. This makes him feel inferior on the front stage.

Novels and books serve as intellectual props in his university life, making him significant in school and university. He uses his literary knowledge to flex his literary knowledge. "In the evenings he stays late in the library, reading assigned texts, novels, and works of literary criticism. Not having friends to eat with, he reads over lunch" (Rooney, 2018, p.52). The solitude while reading underscores a deep sense of self-reliance that prompts him to seek knowledge and comprehend independently. These books and libraries portray his desire for progress in academic and social life. He carries his notebook and novels to everyone in his college as a symbol of his intellectualism.

The setting of the stage sharpens the scene and shapes the individual's behaviour. The setting or environment instructs individuals on how to present themselves in their lives. Connell's hometown is Carricklea in Ireland, and his working-class identity is significant in the social script. "He has a life in Carricklea, he has friends" (Rooney, 2018, p.23). His hometown plays a significant part as a sphere where his social identity and social connections are cherished. It represents his comfort zone, social identity and connection in his early life. He has the freedom

in his hometown that feels like home. He is adhering to the social standards and norms in his hometown that might reveal his identity.

In Contrast, Trinity College in Dublin is a setting that makes him cautious about his attitudes and speaking. He wants to fit into the social setting that makes him feel comfortable without any insecurities. “Unable to form such straightforward views or express them with any force, Connell initially felt a sense of crushing inferiority to his fellow students “ (Rooney, 2018,p.52). This illustrates the transition in the protagonist's life, particularly in terms of setting and social differences, during their time in college. The intellectuality of Connell helps them to give their point of view in a public forum. However, he has low self-esteem, which causes an inferiority complex in his actions, according to social scripts, influencing his self. He is self-aware of his activities in university and restricts himself from social interaction with elite people.

Audience:

In the dramaturgical approach, the audience plays a significant role in shaping an individual's self-perception within social interaction. The novel represents symbolic and imagined audiences that influence self-presentation and emotional conflicts. Friends and classmates in school and college are a significant audience in this setting. In his school, his peers were judgmental about his attitudes and social interactions with others. So, he is reluctant to reveal their relationship with his audience. He fears the social perception in the school. He even abandons Marianne to pursue social validation at school during the day, at Trinity College. There, Marianne, her friends, and students in literary discussions become his audience. He presents himself as a confident young man, masking his internal emotions.

Lorraine is the mother of Connell; she stays as a backstage spectator, witnessing his gentle side. He encourages him to make his life decisions wisely. He wants his son to be emotionally honest in his relationship with Marianne at school. She never wants him to façade his identity and character. In the narrative, the social audience plays a significant role in the protagonist's performance. The social audience encompasses class differences, social norms, and social expectations, which collectively influence self-image. Connell's class difference in college makes him feel distant from his peer groups. His confident self is destroyed by the class differences and financial struggles that he faces in university life. He has low self-esteem when it comes to financial status and class differences within his social group at the university.

Conclusion

This research study analyses the protagonist's trajectory of self-presentation over different social settings. The dramaturgical approach offers the performative nature of social identity in the narrative. The study highlights the front-stage and back-stage behaviours of the main character that reflect the complexities between

the authentic self and the socially constructed self. Furthermore, Impression management by role performance emphasises the individual's desire to perform effectively in their social setting. The Props and settings add to the effectiveness of the performance. Therefore, this study explores the theatricality of social interaction in literary works that portray identity formation and self-image.

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