

Sally Rooney. *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. Faber and Faber, 2021. Pp. 337. £16.99. ISBN: 9780571365425.



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After being claimed a “totemic novelist for the millennial generation” (Leszkiewicz 40), Sally Rooney brings out her newest novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) only to reconfirm that her works are definitely major representatives of current youth experiences. Apart from her gifted skills, her popularity is also due to the current public recognition of female writers propelled by the current post-Celtic Tiger environment. After living the capitalist and consumerist boom of the Celtic Tiger, present Irish society seems to have become a more “arts-friendly” place, where literature is being crafted again more freely (Bracken and Harney-Mahajan 2). Thereby, the subsequent literary “creative energy” (2) that prevails these days is a factor that has certainly helped the emergence and success of the Castlebar Irish novelist. Among other Irish female writers, such as Eimear McBride, Sara Baume or Louise O’Neill, Rooney has become an important figure reaffirming the upsurge of Irish female voices and the increasing representation and visibility of Irish girlhood in literature. Diverse topical issues have always been tackled in her novels ever since her debut, *Conversations with Friends*, was first released in 2017. One of these is traumatized female sexuality, which happens to be commonplace in other contemporary novels such as *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) by Eimear McBride or *Asking for it* (2015) by Louise O’Neill. In fact, this environment is arguably giving way to what Susan Cahill calls a “potentially fertile moment of girlhood in Ireland” (168). However, in her latest literary production, little attention is drawn to girlhood as the characters are already in their thirties from the beginning of the novel. Instead, Rooney focuses on other contemporary matters which had remained incipient in her previous works. These are the impact of capitalism on the environment, and an approach to Catholicism as a form of understanding life—rather than a form of oppression—whilst living in a moment of historical crisis led by extreme and exploitative capitalism. These are highly appealing topics for any loyal readers of her work, and most importantly, for those who sympathise with her ideas.

In *Beautiful World* the reader is presented to four main characters—Eileen, Simon, Alice, and Felix—whose main goal for the whole novel is to

try to make sense of life. Love and friendship, as well as in Rooney's previous novels, act as the most important bonds in connecting them. Alice, a famous novelist, establishes a romantic relationship with Felix, whom she meets via Tinder, and also has a friendly relationship with Eileen, who, in turn, presents Simon, a Catholic (although not a conservative) character, as a lifelong friend and a repressed romantic match. Having introduced all four characters, different themes—just like their relationships—develop as Eileen and Alice send each other periodical emails sharing their thoughts and daily experiences. The fact that some of the most significant topics are tackled through different messaging apps might be one of the most important factors that gives Rooney's newly released novel a fresh and generational touch; some of the social media platforms that are introduced include Tinder or WhatsApp.

As regards some of the most key and remarkable topics, some discussions on the degradation of planet Earth or, as Eileen calls it, "the decadent declining phase" of civilisation (208), are introduced. This is a problem that characters attach to the effects of consumerism and capitalism, and undeniably, the most insightful and compelling conversations in the novel are presented when dealing with this topic, revealing likewise one of the author's greatest worries: "I think it's unhealthy for the arts, . . . it's unhealthy for the society in general, and I think that capitalism is killing the planet in general," argued the Irish novelist in 2018 in one of her interviews ("Sally Rooney on Normal People"). Interestingly, in *Beautiful World*, this issue is also presented as an aggravating factor of the characters' mental health by contributing to that existing—and somehow, generational—sense of disorientation and helplessness. The planet emergency appears as one of the major traits that make her latest work a very contemporary Irish novel, and at the same time, it is what makes this piece relatable reading especially for millennials and younger generations. In fact, Rooney's writings have always been evaluated by reviewers as certainly topical works; in analysing *Conversations with Friends*, José Francisco Fernández described it as "a very contemporary Irish novel . . . in that gay couples no longer cause a stir" (272). Indeed, Irish society is no longer the same as it used to be, with the recent social changes that have come about, such as the legislation on same sex marriage in 2015 and the repeal of the Eighth Amendment in 2018, proof of the recent Irish social shift, which is inevitably starting to be reflected in literary productions such as those of Rooney. Therefore, if *Conversations* is a very contemporary Irish novel due to its treatment of LGTBQ+ matters, then *Beautiful World* is, again, a very contemporary Irish novel due to the level of

awareness when it comes to the natural environment and mental health issues. In fact, some of the most recent environmental movements in Ireland include the 2019, 2021 and 2022 school strikes, which emerged as part of the “global wave of climate strikes” (O’Doherty, Kelleher and McQuinn), joining and participating, this way, in the “Fridays For Future” worldwide movement, which is both led and organised by youth.

There is also another major topic that characterises Rooney’s latest work as a modern Irish novel and differentiates itself from her earlier productions; this is the introduction and discussion of Catholicism from a certainly innovative point of view. Religion is depicted in *Beautiful World* from two perspectives, and arguably, this is what makes the discussion of this topic so particularly engaging. On the one hand, Rooney illustrates the distrustful and wary Irish stance towards Catholicism in characters such as Lola—Eileen’s sister—, Felix, or even Eileen herself. One of the most significant and representative scenes is the conversation that Lola has with Eileen with regards to her sister having a relationship with Simon, who happens to be a Catholic:

Lola: ‘You realise he goes to confession right’

Lola: ‘Like he literally tells his bad thoughts to a priest’

...

Lola: ‘Money down he turns out to be sexually deviant’ (195)

What is most interesting about Lola’s concern with Simon being a Catholic is the way in which this reflects the actual feelings of the Irish after the 1990s scandals regarding clerical sex abuse. Ever since these events, the church has become an institution of mistrust for the youngest Irish generations. Nevertheless, Rooney also introduces, on the other hand, a contrasting stance to this one that is mostly attributed to and defended by Alice, who, in an attempt to make meaning out of life, starts to seek refuge in the figure of Jesus. As a matter of fact, she introduces interesting discussions about Catholicism such as the one comparing a reader’s capacity to develop love for any characters to Jesus’ love for humanity: “when we love fictional characters, knowing that they can never love us in return, is that not a method of practising in miniature the kind of personally disinterested love to which Jesus calls us?” (232). All this display of religion-related topics is actually far from being an outdated issue when taking the fresh and innovatory point of view from which it is discussed into consideration. In that sense, it could be argued that Rooney might be presenting what Tom Inglis called the

“protestantization” of Irish Catholicism, in his book *Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland* (2014). He argued that while Catholics at present “believ[e] in core Christian beliefs, they do not belong to the church or participate in its rituals and practices in the same way as in previous generations” (125). In any case, what Rooney makes clear in *Beautiful World* is the human urge to find guidance in their lives. No matter the epoch, humans need something to believe in; and the arrival of celebrity culture could be seen as a consequence of “the emptiness left by religion” (328). As Rooney herself argued for *The Irish Times* in 2017, “we got rid of the Catholic church and replaced it with predatory capitalism” (Nolan), criticising the little progress achieved in such a shift, but also emphasising one more time the human need for attachment and guidance. Precisely, the depiction of these thoughts is one of the reasons that makes her latest novel so worthwhile, since they reflect an important part of the mentality of new Irish generations, especially those who have experienced the economic boom and the recessionary and post-Celtic Tiger periods.

Nonetheless, *Beautiful World* captures many other topics that, having read the author’s previous works, could be considered typical “Roonian” themes. One of these is the commodification of the arts and the hypocrisy that hides in such a process, which is mostly developed by Alice, who achieved to work on—and became a millionaire from writing. Alice’s concerns about her fame and her discomfort about her new lifestyle are made clear very early in the novel: “whatever insignificant talent I might have, people just expect me to sell it . . . until I have a lot of money and no talent left” (Rooney 55), and they are arguably parallel to those of Rooney. Her comments on such a topic are always related to a dissatisfaction regarding the capitalist world of fame and celebrities that both Rooney and fictitious Alice have just joined. In this context, one can argue that it is not only Alice’s situation and social status what makes her an analogous character to Rooney, but rather her thoughts are what really connect her to her creator. I would even argue that Alice becomes a source through which Rooney allows the reader to engage with her own worries and ideas more closely. In this sense, she is Rooney’s most important speaker. In fact, prior to the publication of *Beautiful World*, Rooney already expressed how unsettling it was for her to take part in the commodification of the arts as an emerging well-known novelist: “I can say: ‘If you can’t afford it, steal my book’, but my position in the structure, as someone who makes money from intellectual property, makes my saying it quite hollow” (qtd. in Leszkiewicz 40).

One last typical “Roonian” matter that the Irish novelist introduces again is the issue of normalcy. The concept of “normal” is once more featured in *Beautiful World*, alluding, this way, to her second novel *Normal People* (2018), in which the study of “normality” became paramount. In making sense of their lives, characters in Rooney’s latest work tend to conceive themselves as anything but “normal.” Alice, in particular, seems to be the character who most struggles to achieve normality after becoming a famous novelist, a matter that, again, seems parallel to Rooney’s concerns. In this context, the labelling of relationships is also introduced as another goal for her characters to achieve the coveted “normalcy.” She explored such an issue in her two previous novels by depicting affective relationships that seem to escape all social labels—friends, lovers, partners, etc.—and this again becomes another characteristic of the relationships between the four main protagonists in her latest production. What is most interesting is that this topic is not only shown but it is also discussed by characters themselves. Whilst Bobbi from *Conversations* described labelled relationships as “prefabricated cultural dynamics” (306), Alice in *Beautiful World* describes the same as relationships with a “preordained shape” (93). So, what Rooney seems to highlight here for the reader is a persistent rejection to fit into the mould, a stance that is becoming more and more popular specially among younger generations.

All things considered, one might argue that Rooney’s latest novel is her most revelatory literary production in terms of how charged it is with her deepest concerns and ideology. In this sense, as Sam Sacks put it while reviewing this work, there is the possibility of regarding this novel as “Sally Rooney’s *Apologia pro Vita Sua*.” Thereby, *Beautiful World* might be, a definitely convenient reading for meditating and thinking over different topical issues affecting present Irish society, and it is therefore an excellent option for those interested in Ireland’s latest social movements. Moreover, it is also worth reaffirming the accuracy with which Rooney depicts plenty of aspects from contemporary Irish society, which, in turn, makes it an appealing work on which, hopefully, do thorough research related to new thoughts and discussions emerging in present Irish society.

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