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Marxist Romance: On Sally Rooney's Conversations with Friends and Normal People

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ABSTRACT : *Sally Rooney describes herself as a "committed Marxist", and her novels are replete with Marxist elements, with her characters embodying Marxist thought. The progression from the post-anarchism in Conversations with Friends to the Marxism in Normal People demonstrates, from a diachronic perspective, the gradual maturation and consolidation of Rooney's own convictions as a Marxist believer. As a millennial writer, the evolution of her characters' political beliefs and the consequent transformation of their perspectives on love reflect a general trajectory of ideological development among contemporary youth against the backdrop of prevailing capitalism. Rooney's ultimate embrace of a "committed Marxist" stance offers valuable lessons for young people today in navigating crises of faith and emotional dilemmas.Therefore, this paper aims to examine the divergent views on love held by the characters in Rooney's two novels under the influence of capitalism, along with the different choices they make under the guidance of these views, in order to illustrate the modern applicability of Marxist discourse on love. Through this analysis, the paper further elucidates the contemporary value of Marxism, assisting modern individuals in overcoming crises of faith and emotional predicaments.*

KEYWORDS: *Marxism, Contemporary Value, Sally Rooney, Conversations with Friends, Normal People*

I. INTRODUCTION

When the inherent crises of capitalism erupt, people's faith in capitalism is shaken, and they often turn to other belief systems. Sally Rooney's two novels, *Conversations with Friends* (hereinafter referred to as *Conversations*) and *Normal People* (hereinafter referred to as *Normal*), are both set in Ireland under the impact of the 2008 US subprime mortgage crisis, a global financial crisis that brought an end to Ireland's "Celtic Tiger" era. Against this backdrop, the characters in *Conversations* turn to anarchism in their political beliefs while choosing to maintain triangular love relationships in their emotional lives; the characters in *Normal* turn to Marxism in their political beliefs while adhering to the exclusivity of love in their emotional lives. As representative figures of post-Celtic Tiger Irish literature and contemporary "millennial writers", Rooney's fictional characters not only reveal the crisis of faith and the consequent emotional crisis commonly observed in Western society when faced with capitalist economic turmoil, but also reflect the crisis of faith and emotional dilemmas universally experienced by contemporary young people under the influence of capitalist alienation. As a "committed Marxist", Rooney demonstrates through these two novels a fundamental truth: crises of faith lead to emotional dilemmas, and ideology influences emotional life. For contemporary young people to overcome crises of faith, they must turn to classical Marxism; to cultivate healthy emotional lives, they must turn to the conception of love advocated by Marxism.

First, the conception of love advocated by Marxism requires that partners in a romantic relationship achieve a state of personal equality and power balance. Second, Friedrich Engels proposed that ideal love must possess the attributes of exclusivity and particularity. Finally, the Marxist discourse on love embodies the idea that love should entail being "for the Other" (für den Anderen). These three aspects constitute the conception of love inherent in classical Marxism, which, in an era dominated by what might be termed "love capitalism" has acquired renewed contemporary significance. Therefore, this paper aims to examine Rooney's two Marxist love novels, *Conversations* and *Normal*, in order to illustrate the contemporary value of classical Marxism and the guiding role of its discourse on love in helping contemporary young people overcome crises of faith and navigate their way out of emotional dilemmas.

II. PERSONAL EQUALITY AND POWER BALANCE

Marxism regards equality as the ultimate goal of human emancipation, highlighting its value as a social ethic. The family, as the basic unit of society, should likewise embody the value of equality in its familial ethics. Marxism emphasizes that mutual love is the prerequisite for marriage; therefore, equality should also become a necessary condition for healthy romantic relationships. So how do the developmental trajectories of the characters' romantic relationships in Rooney's two novels demonstrate, from both positive and negative aspects, the importance of personal equality and power balance in establishing healthy love relationships?

The relationship between Frances and Nick in *Conversations* is generally characterized by power imbalance. This imbalance stems primarily from two factors: on one hand, Frances is a third party in Nick and Melissa's relationship, a presence that must remain hidden within this love triangle; on the other hand, Nick and Frances have different socioeconomic statuses—the former owns property and has a career, while the latter is a financially dependent university student. What prompted Frances to become involved in Nick and Melissa's relationship? This was largely influenced by Bobbie. Under Bobbie's influence, Frances, though a communist, became ensnared in the vortex of anarchism. Bobbie's thinking is imbued with anarchist tendencies; she opposes capitalism and the state apparatus, and believes that monogamy is a product of capitalism and the state apparatus, designed to maintain the patriarchal need for male inheritance of wealth. She argues that to overthrow capitalism, one must also overthrow the state apparatus and monogamy. However, according to Engels' discourse, monogamy and the state apparatus are not inherently problematic; what is problematic is monogamy as it operates under the capitalist system. Moreover, "it is precisely the state apparatus that guarantees the social ownership of the means of production, thereby providing the power mechanism for breaking down old patterns of love and marriage and achieving the unity of monogamous love and monogamous marriage" (Gao, 2024:51). When Frances first became involved with Nick and Melissa, she experienced a sense of moral transgression. However, influenced by Bobbie, she intellectually justified her involvement by embracing the "universal love" advocated in the Bible. Yet her position as the third party still made her jealous of the relationship between Nick and Melissa, which also contributed to the power imbalance between her and Nick. The power imbalance arising from their different socioeconomic statuses can be attributed to the contradiction between Frances's rational cognition and her emotional perception. Frances "never wanted to earn money for doing anything" (Rooney, 2017:23). She rejected careers supposedly creating greater social value, preferring only low-income work because she believed that occupations should not be ranked as superior or inferior—all work should have equal value. She also believed that human wealth should be equally distributed, and "felt that my disinterest in wealth was ideologically healthy" (Rooney, 2017:23). Yet she could not escape the imprint of traditional social values upon her; the wealth gap and class difference between her and Nick still made her feel inferior. When she thought Nick's family must be wealthy, she avoided the topic because she "already felt self-conscious about never paying for anything" (Rooney, 2017:75). This contributed to the power imbalance between her and Nick.

In *Normal*, the process through which Marianne and Connell's relationship achieves a state of personal equality and power balance is arduous and gradual. Their power dynamics undergo two transformations. In high school, Marianne is the target of bullying while Connell is the heartthrob among their classmates; their different positions in interpersonal relationships are reflected in the power imbalance within their intimate relationship. Connell's decision to conceal his relationship with Marianne, and Marianne's ready acceptance of this decision, clearly reflects the power imbalance—Connell holds absolute power. Notably, the identities of the employer's daughter and the employee's son do not significantly affect their power dynamics at this stage. This is because even though they are aware of their class differences—Marianne knows that "she's from a good family and Connell is from a bad one" (Rooney, 2018:32), and Connell's friend Rob asks him whether Marianne "thinks of you as her butler" (Rooney, 2018:23)—these factors do not greatly impact their power dynamics. For instance, when Lorraine suggests that Marianne's mother might oppose Connell due to their different classes, "the idea that Marianne's family considered themselves superior to himself and Lorraine, too good to associate with them, had never occurred to him before" (Rooney, 2018:51). This is because they have not yet inherited the wealth of the previous generation and have not yet experienced firsthand the impact of class differences. Therefore, capitalism has not yet exerted its alienating effect on them. In this sense, the love of youth is pure, unaffected by capitalist alienation; such love contains no material components or impurities. This is pure love—the union of two like-minded individuals, enabling one to be affirmed and making one's life whole. Thus, what prematurely ends Marianne and Connell's love during this period is not the alienating influence of capitalism, but rather the unequal power dynamics resulting from their unequal personal status. Connell, who holds more power at the time, ultimately chooses to be with Rachel and thus abandons his relationship with Marianne. Yet this decision is made not out of love or affection, but out of self-interest. It can be said that Connell's involvement with Rachel is essentially a commodity exchange—Connell trades his relationship with Rachel for the chance to become a "normal person"—and such a relationship based on transactional exchange is not true love.

The first shift in the power dynamics between Marianne and Connell occurs after they reunite at university. This shift is caused by the differences in their economic circumstances and class status—that is, the alienating effect of capitalism on human emotions. The class difference between Marianne and Connell has always existed, but the pure emotion between them during their youth had not yet been contaminated by capitalism. Entering university, however, the alienating effect of capitalism on human emotions gradually manifests itself. Economic factors objectively influence their positions and roles in social relationships, and subjectively influence their actions and choices within their intimate relationship. The former is evident in how their respective social circles perceive their class status. For example, when evaluating Connell's attire, Marianne's friends Peggy and Joanna refer to his class background—"He wears nice clothes"; "He has a look,

but it's just tracksuits most of the time. I doubt he even owns a suit"; "Well, isn't he from a fairly working-class background?"; "That's so oversensitive. I can't criticise someone's dress sense because of their socioeconomic status? Come on" (Rooney, 2018:85-86). The latter is evident in how their different economic circumstances affect their intimate relationship. Connell is already aware of the different impact class difference has on them, once complaining to Marianne: "People here are such snobs", "That's why it's easy for you, by the way. Because you're from a rich family, that's why people like you" (Rooney, 2018:88-89). Additionally, Connell's financial situation improves through his connection to Marianne's social circle—"Rich people look out for each other, and being Marianne's best friend and suspected sexual partner has elevated Connell to the status of rich-adjacent" (Rooney, 2018:93). Connell even directly states: "I think her new boyfriend is a bit

more in line with her social class" (Rooney, 2018:125). This awareness of their different social standing inevitably influences Connell's behavior within the intimate relationship—that is, one's position in social relationships inevitably affects one's power within an intimate relationship. Therefore, after entering university, their power dynamics undergo a first shift. In terms of social relationships, influenced by economic status, Marianne becomes the favored one in her social circle, while Connell often finds himself alone: "he has a sense of invisibility, nothingness, with no reputation to recommend him to anyone" (Rooney, 2018:70). The alienating effect of capitalism on human emotions manifests in their relationship when Connell's part-time job situation becomes problematic: "he could just about make rent that way but he'd have nothing left to live on." While "he could tell her about the situation and ask if he could stay at her place until September," every time he planned to "bring it up with her and then at the last minute failing to.It just felt too much like asking her for money. He and Marianne never talked about money" (Rooney, 2018:122). So Connell chooses to leave Dublin that summer, resulting in their second separation. Connell's refusal to ask Marianne for help also represents his refusal to cede power to Marianne; thus, up to this point, their power dynamics have not undergone a dramatic shift. This separation also demonstrates that the germination and development of love must break free from the alienating influence of capitalism on human emotions.

The true shift in these power dynamics occurs when Connell, after being robbed, calls Marianne for help. Connell's act of showing vulnerability to Marianne represents his ceding of power to her, and also demonstrates his increased emotional trust in her. This shift tilts the balance of power toward Marianne. However, overcoming the alienating obstacles of capitalism in emotional relationships is not achieved overnight; it requires accumulated time and emotional groundwork. If Connell had not realized that "he's not someone who feels comfortable confiding in others, or demanding things from them. He needs Marianne for that reason" (Rooney, 2018:135), and gradually let down his defenses with her, it would have been difficult for Connell to cede power to Marianne. The progression from initially choosing separation over asking Marianne for help, to finally being able to ask her for financial assistance, marks a significant milestone in Marianne and Connell's relationship. Yet their relationship has still not achieved a state of power balance, because just as Connell cedes power to Marianne, he once again retreats, telling her he loves his new girlfriend, and so things once again fizzle out between them. However, this does not affect the shift in their power dynamics, because even though Connell now has a new girlfriend, he still turns to Marianne—rather than his girlfriend—for financial help, indicating the deeper emotional bond between him and Marianne.The second shift in power dynamics occurs after Marianne returns to her hometown from Sweden. This time, Marianne attempts to cede power to Connell by taking on the role of the submissive sexual partner, hoping to achieve power balance in their relationship. However, Connell refuses her request, because even though "ever since school he has understood his power over her", and "in fact he has cultivated it, and he knows he has" (Rooney, 2018:248), when the power Connell holds over Marianne is manifested in such an extreme manner, it becomes overly violent. The power Marianne attempts to cede in this way is not the power he desires, nor is it a power he can exercise. Power ceded in this manner cannot lead them to a state of personal equality and power balance; on the contrary, it would only distort their relationship.

The relationship truly achieves power balance when Marianne, after her nose is injured by her brother, calls Connell for help. This signifies that Marianne finally reveals the family conflict she had long found difficult to discuss, presenting it openly to Connell and seeking his help—this is the healthy way to cede power. After this, "in a rush he feels his power over her again" (Rooney, 2018:252), and Marianne also feels "how strange to feel herself so completely under the control of another person, but also how ordinary."(Rooney, 2018:262) At this point, Connell and Marianne's power dynamics achieve balance—"she was in his power, he had chosen to redeem her, she was redeemed" (Rooney, 2018:262).

III. MONOGAMY AND EXCLUSIVITY

When it comes to love as an emotional relationship, Marx argues that the unity of spiritual and physical needs is the greatest distinction between humans and animals. Engels maintains that "sex love is by its nature exclusive" (Engels, 2018: 88). The maintenance of monogamy and exclusivity requires self-restraint, which determines that the emotional dimensions of love include responsibility and obligation. Thus, why does Frances,

whose thinking exhibits anarchist tendencies, deny the monogamy and exclusivity of love? And why do Marianne and Connell, who embrace Marxism, insist upon the monogamy and exclusivity of love?

"In the times of crisis, we must all decide again and again whom we love." This epigraph from Conversations suggests that in moments of crisis, love should no longer be merely an emotional experience but should become a rational act. Against the backdrop of crisis-era Ireland, Frances, as a communist, faces a spiritual crisis, lacking sufficient rational judgment. She goes astray politically by falling into the trap of anarchism, and emotionally she exhibits a state of "relationship anarchy". Frances's spiritual crisis manifests in several ways: first, her spirit exists in a state of drifting without anchor, severely lacking in self-identity. For example, after seeing Melissa's smile, Frances thinks: "I knew I would enviously practise this smile later in a mirror" (Rooney, 2017: 11). Frances also "liked to imagine that I looked like Bobbi": "The pretence was so real to me that when I accidentally caught sight of my reflection and saw my own appearance, I felt a strange, depersonalising shock" (Rooney, 2017: 14). Simply put, Frances desperately lacks self-worth validation; she wants to be anyone but herself. Second, physical illness manifests her spiritual malfunction. Having fallen into the vortex of post-structuralist political philosophy, Frances enters an infinite loop of spiritual suffering, which manifests in physical illness—Rooney endows Frances with a condition of unknown etiology: endometriosis.

Influenced by Bobbi, Frances exhibits anarchist tendencies in her political stance, and political attitudes shape emotional life. Consequently, Frances accepts polyamorous relationships and denies the monogamy and exclusivity of love. During her development, Frances has been repeatedly exposed to post-structuralist thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan. Post-structuralist thought is essentially consistent with anarchism in that both are philosophies concerned with critiquing power and opposing power (Gao, 2024: 49-50). Influenced by this value system, Frances lacks the capacity for self-restraint required to maintain monogamy and exclusivity in love, as self-restraint itself would be perceived as a form of power, contradicting her belief system.

Historical materialism posits that the essence of humanity is the totality of social relations, emphasizing human responsibility and obligation within society. Marxism understands love as a combination of natural attributes and social attributes, emphasizing human responsibility and obligation in love. Guided by these values, both Marianne and Connell endorse power, believe in power, affirm the role of constraint, consciously assume responsibility and obligation in love, and possess the capacity to maintain monogamy and exclusivity. They believe that true love is inherently exclusive because it involves an intensely intimate relationship that admits no third party. When Peggy proposes a threesome to Connell, his thought is that he might be able to have sex with Peggy in front of Marianne, but he could not have sex with Marianne in front of Peggy, "for the privacy between himself and Marianne to be invaded by Peggy, or another person, would destroy something inside him, a part of his selfhood." (Rooney, 2018: 101). Marianne likewise firmly rejects triangular relationships, consistently upholding the monogamy and exclusivity of love. For instance, after arguing with Jamie, when she confides in Connell and he tries to kiss her, she refuses (Rooney, 2020: 184).

The fundamental value orientation of historical materialism is reflected in the pursuit of comprehensive and free human development. Ideal love should not only bring joy to both partners but also promote the cultivation and development of their personalities. Whether in Normal with Marianne and Connell, or in Conversations with Frances and Nick, their love stories are not without difficulties. However, the presence or absence of monogamy and exclusivity determines whether their love can positively impact their life development and personal growth. While love in triangular or polyamorous relationships may bring participants pleasure or even thrilling novelty, such feelings are superficial and frivolous; lacking substantive weight, such emotions can hardly exert profound influence on personal development. By upholding monogamy and exclusivity, and actively assuming the responsibilities and obligations accompanying love, Marianne and Connell achieve mutual redemption. Connell enables Marianne to experience the kindness she has never known since childhood, allowing her to recognize that she too is worthy of love, and ultimately to realize her self-worth. Marianne helps Connell navigate his life confusion and restore hope for his future. Their love demonstrates that "people can really change one another" (Rooney, 2018: 266).

IV. BEING "FOR THE OTHER"

As discussed above, an ideal romantic relationship should achieve the comprehensive and free development of both partners. Yet this highest ideal of love is difficult to attain, for as Marx observed: "The course of true love never did run smooth" (Marx, 1867). Achieving this ideal requires mutual support and assistance between partners. The prerequisite for such mutual support and assistance is to break through one's own isolation, shed one's defenses, transcend the self, expose one's vulnerabilities, and accept the entry of "the Other."

"It is one of the secrets in that change of mental poise which has been fitly named conversion, that to many among us neither heaven nor earth has any revelation till some personality touches theirs with a peculiar influence, subduing them into receptiveness." This epigraph from Normal is taken from George Eliot's Daniel

Deronda. The epigraph of a book often reflects its central theme, and this epigraph emphasizes the mutual influence between individuals. Rooney also mentioned in an interview: "I think what's really important for me all the way through all my work is human dynamics, interpersonal dynamics" (Rooney, 2026). Only when others become "the Other" can they bring transformative influence to our lives. Normal portrays not only the love story of Connell and Marianne but also, against this backdrop, their respective journeys of growth.

During her high school years, Marianne's personality was markedly withdrawn. The book describes her at this time: "She has no friends and spends her lunchtimes alone reading novels. A lot of people really hate her" (Rooney, 2018: 2). Yet her withdrawn nature manifests not only externally in her friendlessness and solitary habits, but more significantly in her self-perception and inner experience. In social settings, for instance, she does not consider herself a participant but rather "an intruder, and an awkward one" (Rooney, 2018: 30). Moreover, she knows very little about the world she inhabits, always maintaining a sense of distance. Marianne's feeling of detachment from reality indicates the absence of "the Other" in her life. The reasons lie in her family environment: her father's domestic violence, her mother's indifference, her brother's bullying—a distorted upbringing that shaped Marianne's distorted personality (Eppel, 2020: 2). Marianne's distorted personality manifests in two aspects: the polar tension between inferiority and narcissism, and the contradiction between her aversion to violence and her inclination toward it.

Inferiority and narcissism—these two extreme personality tendencies often coexist, and the tension between them can plunge the subject into profound suffering. Whether inferiority or narcissism, both result in a rejection of "the Other". As Byung-Chul Han states: "The narcissist continuously kneads and twists the Other until he recognizes his own image in him" (Han, 2019: 32). And "excessive narcissistic self-reference produces a sense of emptiness" (Han, 2019: 33). The narcissistic subject can only recognize his own image in the Other; the entire world becomes a projection of the self. This leads to the disappearance of "the Other". The existence of the Other requires the intervention of negativity. Yet the inferior person cannot articulate their own pain, thus obstructing the intervention of this negative element—pain—and also denying the Other the right to enter.

Inferiority makes Marianne ashamed of her experiences, too ashamed to speak of them to others; narcissism makes Marianne feel superior to others, disdainful of speaking to them, thereby keeping others at a distance. Marianne's inferiority is evident in her harsh and distant attitude toward everyone; she struggles to express her inner thoughts, erecting a wall that emotionally isolates her from the outside world, refusing the entry of "the Other." Connell once asks her: "Why do you have to be so harsh on people?" (Rooney, 2018: 6). Marianne herself directly expresses her inferiority: "I don't feel lovable. I think I have an unlovable sort of... I have a coldness about me, I'm difficult to like" (Rooney, 2018: 101). Marianne's narcissism manifests in her desire to be different and superior. When Connell says, "you're smarter than me", Marianne replies: "Don't feel bad. I'm smarter than everyone" (Rooney, 2018: 2). A conversation that reveals the coexistence of her inferiority and narcissism is: "I know you probably hate me, but you're the only one who actually talks to me." "I never said I hated you" (Rooney, 2018: 6). Assuming without reason the worst perception of herself in others' eyes reflects Marianne's inferiority; assuming without reason that she leaves any impression on others reflects her narcissism. Torn between these two extremes of inferiority and narcissism, Marianne suffers intensely. Beyond this, Marianne's distorted personality also manifests in the contradiction between her aversion to violence and her inclination toward it. Marianne's father abused her mother, and her brother bullied her; logically, given Marianne's views on her family relationships as depicted in the novel, one would expect her to despise violence. Yet she later displays masochistic tendencies: "Maybe I want to be treated badly, she said. I don't know. Sometimes I think I deserve bad things because I'm a bad person" (Rooney, 2018: 133). This is what researchers term "paradoxical normality" (Merve, 2021: 84). In response to violence, Marianne adopts silence: silence toward the perpetrator—non-resistance; and silence toward bystanders—non-disclosure. Additionally, she defines herself through her trauma, exhibiting masochistic tendencies, refusing change, and refusing to seek help from "the Other." Therefore, for Marianne to alleviate her adolescent pain, she must break her silence and allow "the Other" to enter.

If personality distortion is the "tumor" causing Marianne's suffering, then depression is the "wound" Connell must heal. In high school, Connell showed signs of depression: after separating from Marianne, "at lunch he sat in the same place as always, eating sad mouthful of food, not listening to his friends when they spoke" (Rooney, 2018: 74). After Marianne disappeared from his life, "he was excruciatingly lonely" (Rooney, 2018: 74). Upon entering university, he displays various signs of depression—easily anxious, tense, and unsettled. For example, when presenting on Le Morte d'Arthur, "his voice wavered several time and he had the sense that if he hadn't been seated, he would have fallen to the ground" (Rooney, 2018: 99); when talking with Marianne's friend Peggy, he continuously fiddles with his beer label, feeling very anxious. Furthermore, Connell's depression manifests in his loss of hope for the future and loss of confidence in himself. Connell's depression is also caused by the absence of "the Other". Even though he seeks help from a therapist, this does not help him resolve his inner struggles. For Connell, the therapist is not an ideal "the Other" because he instinctively resists the act of seeking psychological counseling. When filling out the therapy questionnaire,

even though "he feels his future was hopeless and will only get worse" (Rooney, 2018: 201), for "no wanting to alarm the woman who will receive the questionnaire, he circles statement 2 instead" (Rooney, 2018: 201). Thus, Connell does not fully open his heart to allow the therapist as a true "the Other" to enter his inner world. The identity of "the Other" can only be established on the basis of trust, and Connell "was not by nature someone who liked to confide in others or ask them for anything" (Rooney, 2018: 128). Therefore, for Connell to overcome depression, he must open his heart and accept the entry of "the Other".

The process through which Marianne and Connell allow each other to enter each other's lives as "the Other" is long and arduous. In high school, Connell's quality as "the Other" for Marianne begins to emerge faintly. For instance: "If she was different with Connell, the difference was not happening inside herself, in her personhood, but in between them, in the dynamic" (Rooney, 2018: 14). Moreover, when Connell first says "I love you" to Marianne, the author describes Marianne's inner state: "She has never believed herself fit to be loved by any person. But now she has a new life, of which this is the first moment, and even after many years have passed she will still think: Yes, that was it, the beginning of my life" (Rooney, 2018: 44). This shows that Connell's appearance changes the trajectory of Marianne's life, demonstrating the importance of the appearance of "the Other" in one's life development. During the same period, however, Connell does not grant Marianne the status of a qualified "the Other"; he does not allow her to enter his inner world. After his friend Rob asks about his mother working at Marianne's house (Rooney, 2018: 20-21), his reason for continuing to see Marianne is not his pure affection for her, but "this inexplicable drive to act on perverse and secret desires" (Rooney, 2018: 23), which focuses his attention on sexuality rather than eros. Sexuality cannot establish an emotional connection between him and Marianne; this lack of spiritual communion deprives the sexual act of the pleasure it should produce, so after sex, "Connell felt a pleasurable sorrow come over him, which brought him close to tears" (Rooney, 2018: 25). Another reason Connell nearly cries is his extreme concern for others' opinions: "Marianne lived a drastically free life, he could see that. He was trapped by various considerations." (Rooney, 2018: 25). His speculation about others' opinions is also extremely negative, and based on these speculations, his reactions are nearly distorted. First, this is evident in his desperate concealment of his relationship with Marianne. Second, when he realizes his friends might discover his relationship with Marianne, Connell feels "his life would be over" (Rooney, 2018: 24). Therefore, in high school, Connell's extreme concern for others' opinions leads him to hide his relationship with Marianne, thereby hindering the normal development of their relationship and consequently obstructing the establishment of Marianne's status as "the Other." However, after they reunite at university, during a conversation about Connell's behavior toward Marianne in high school, Marianne says: "I forgive you." Connell responds: "Thank you. I think I did learn from it. And hopefully I have changed, you know, as a person. But honestly, if I have, it's because of you" (Rooney, 2018: 92). The change Marianne brings to Connell indicates that years later, Marianne's status as "the Other" for Connell is gradually established. A striking manifestation of Connell's change is his increased ease in social situations and decreased concern for others' opinions—"He put his arm around her waist. He had never, ever touched her in front of anyone else before. Their friends had never seen them like this, no one had" (Rooney, 2018: 115). This is because when a person has a kindred "the Other" in their life, the intimate relationship formed with that "the Other" diminishes their concern for those who are not "the Other"—for one of the conditions for allowing "the Other" to enter is to step outside the narcissistic subject, to escape the vortex of self-centeredness. Of course, as discussed earlier, the development of a relationship is full of twists and turns, so after Connell makes this change, they separate a second time. After their reunion at university, even though Marianne and Connell share some wonderful times, Marianne still cannot speak to Connell about her deepest issues; she believes Connell cannot understand her family situation—"He's a well-adjusted person raised in a loving family. He just assum the best of everyone and knows nothing" (Rooney, 2018: 117). Marianne's inability to confide her deepest pain to Connell hinders the establishment of his status as "the Other" for her. The turning point in their relationship during this period occurs after her big argument with Jamie, when she confides in Connell, admitting that she has never felt like a "normal person" and describing her "abnormal" family relationships. At this point, for Marianne, Connell's status as "the Other" gradually becomes established. Connell and Marianne are able to become "the Other" for each other because they help each other become the "normal people" they wish to be; they help each other overcome the greatest obstacles to becoming "normal"—Marianne helps Connell escape his depression; Connell helps Marianne heal from her family trauma. After this, Connell believes he has "definitely become a better person" (Rooney, 2018: 233); when she returns to university, Marianne no longer feels the gaze of others as alienating; she finally feels like a normal person.

Like Marianne, Frances also has complex family trauma; an unhealthy upbringing shapes her distorted personality characterized by the coexistence of inferiority and narcissism. But why can Connell ultimately enter Marianne's life as "the Other" while Nick struggles to enter Frances's life as "the Other"? This is because the deep emotional bond between Connell and Marianne enables Marianne to confide her pain to him; the intervention of this negative element is precisely the precondition for breaking through Marianne's complex of narcissism and inferiority, as well as the precondition for allowing "the Other" to exist. Unlike Marianne and

Connell, Frances and Nick do not adhere to the exclusivity of love; they are not each other's only one, unable to entrust all their emotions to each other. Frances even thinks it's a good thing that Nick is attracted to someone like her, a "plain and emotionally cold woman" (Rooney, 2017: 83). During their relationship, they mention more than once that they find each other's attitude cold. They cannot reveal their full selves to each other because between them lie not only Melissa but also Bobbi. Nick still loves Melissa, and Frances continues to confide in Bobbi what she cannot confide in Nick. Thus, Frances never confides her real pain to Nick; instead, she always aims to present her best self to him. This endless pursuit of positivity is one of the reasons hindering the entry of "the Other". "Rooney endows Frances with an extremely painful and incurable disease, endometriosis, symbolizing the ineradicable pain in her romantic emotions" (Gao, 2024: 52). Frances's refusal to tell Nick about her illness during their relationship represents her choice to remain trapped in an endless cycle of individual suffering, and simultaneously she loses the emotional opening that would allow Nick to enter her life as "the Other". Although Frances feels she can confide more in Nick—for instance: "After this conversation I asked myself why it was that I could talk to Nick about my father, even though I'd never been able to broach the subject with Bobbi. It was true that Nick was an intelligent listener, and I often felt better after we spoke, but those things were true of Bobbi too. lt was more that Nick's sympathy seemed unconditional, like he rooted for me regardless of how I acted, whereas Bobbi had strong principles that she applied to everyone, me included" (Rooney, 2017: 196-197)—this does not indicate that Frances allows Nick to exist as "the Other". On the contrary, it reflects her refusal to allow anyone to exist as "the Other". This inner monologue of Frances exemplifies her strong subjectivity. The possibility of "the Other" is predicated on the subject's acknowledgment of their own "powerlessness". Allowing "the Other" to enter is not a task the subject accomplishes through "I can", but rather an openness to something beyond one's control (Han, 2019).

V. CONCLUSION

The settings of a novel's plot often reflect an author's ideological stance. In Conversations, Frances's transition from communist to anarchist indicates that a Marxist in the nascent stage of their ideological development can easily go astray, while also reflecting Rooney's own ideological wavering. The progression from Frances's anarchist characterization in Conversations to Marianne's Marxist characterization in Normal demonstrates Rooney's gradual consolidation of her Marxist convictions, culminating in her self-identification as a "committed Marxist". The ideological evolution and maturation evident in these two novels also reflect the ideological wavering that every Marxist inevitably experiences in the process of development. As a writer of the so-called millennial generation, the shifts in political attitudes of Rooney's fictional characters mirror the universal trajectory of ideological development for every believer. Given that political attitudes shape emotional lives, the emotional lives of her characters also reflect the common trajectory of romantic relationships among contemporary youth. The insight we can draw from this is that for modern individuals to cultivate a correct conception of love and nurture healthy romantic relationships, they must still turn to classical Marxism and fully realize its contemporary value.

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