



The Self in Transition: Identity Formation and Crisis in Sally Rooney's Normal People

Kirana Auliarally Arsyanti¹, Ruly Indra Darmawan²

^{1,2} English Literature, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Jawa Tengah

| Article Info | Abstract |
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| <p>Received: 2026-04-13 Revised: 2026 04-27 Accepted: 2026 05-31</p> <p>Keywords: Normal People; identity formation; identity crisis</p> <p>DOI: 10.24256/ideasv14i1.10131</p> <p>Corresponding Author: Kirana Auliarally Arsyanti kiranaaulia@students.unnes.ac.id English Literature, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Jawa Tengah</p> | <p><i>This study explores the formation and crisis experienced by the main characters, Connell and Marianne, in Sally Rooney's novel Normal People. The problem in this study focuses on how external social pressures and domestic trauma cause the fracture of the subject's identity. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, specifically the three orders (Imaginary, Symbolic, and the Real), this study employs a descriptive-qualitative method with a literary psychoanalytic approach. The results of the study show that both characters exhibit eccentric identity formation, in which each character's feelings depend entirely on external validation from the Symbolic Order. Connell's crisis is triggered by the destruction of his social status, which causes the failure of the symbolic or automaton function. Meanwhile, for Marianne, this crisis is a cycle of self-deprecation, caused by unprocessed trauma that eventually settles in the realm of reality, which feels foreign and cannot be symbolized through language. This finding concludes that, if others fail to provide a stable label to the subject, the subject's identity is vulnerable to collapse. This study emphasizes that identity is often a fragile construct maintained through uncertain recognition of the external environment.</i></p> |

1. Introduction

The human search for a stable identity is a lifelong process that culminates during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In today's industrialized societies, this journey is characterized as emerging adulthood, in which identity formation is an active struggle to create a cohesive self within an ever-evolving social environment (Côté, 2018; Wood et al., 2018). This transition is

fundamentally a structural process; it marks the subject's journey through the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, as Jacques Lacan identifies them. However, this transition is becoming increasingly precarious. Widespread systemic instability, often referred to as the crisis generation, deepens individuals' sense of self-fragmentation (Chalari & Serifi, 2018). In contemporary Ireland, this is reflected in the widespread vulnerability of young people navigating a post-crisis society (Carmona Moliner, 2023). When traditional social supports fail, particularly in higher education, the inability to adapt to new institutional hierarchies can transform developmental exploration into a significant psychological burden (Côté, 2018; Marcia, 1966).

The psychological and social complexities in Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) have sparked extensive academic debate. From a psychological standpoint, Rahayu (2023) employs Jungian archetypes to reveal how the protagonists adopt intellectual personas as masks to conceal deep-seated anxiety, while Sarıkaya-Şen (2021) examines how domestic trauma leads Marianne to embrace a "paradoxical normality" through masochistic tendencies. Similarly, Ahadini (2021) focuses on Marianne's inner conflicts and emotional development. While these studies offer profound insights into internal character dynamics, they primarily focus on individual behavioral reactions to trauma or archetypal patterns rather than the structural linguistic mechanisms that govern the subject's psyche.

Complementing these psychological readings, other scholars have explored the novel's socio-cultural dimensions. Luying (2023) and Hyde-Price Aggestam (2025) both identify class as a central constraint; Luying highlights the macro-cultural shifts in globalization-era Ireland, whereas Hyde-Price Aggestam specifically examines how Connell is forced to renegotiate his identity within exclusionary academic hierarchies. Furthermore, Femi and Revathi (2025) utilize a dramaturgical lens to analyze the tension between authentic self-presentation and socially constructed personas, a sentiment echoed by Rahmawati (2021) and Ulloa (2025), who examine social conflict and the circulation of affects in defining normality.

Academic scholarship on Sally Rooney's *Normal People* has provided profound insights into the characters' internal psychological archetypes, macro-cultural shifts in contemporary Ireland, and the behavioral manifestations of trauma. However, while these previous studies focus extensively on the descriptive and thematic aspects of identity, they fail to explain the mechanism of identity development at a structural level. Most existing research addresses what the characters experience, such as class constraints or masochistic tendencies, but overlooks the structural process of how identity is built and subsequently dismantled. Therefore, this study fills this gap by utilizing Lacan's Three Orders (the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real) to analyze the entire trajectory of Marianne and Connell's self-construction. This research specifically examines how their identities are initially formed through mirror-like misrecognitions, how they

are forced to negotiate the rigid social rules of the symbolic order, and how they eventually face structural fragmentation when clashing with the real (traumatic moments that defy symbolization). By shifting the focus to these structural interactions, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the subject's struggle for integrity in a demanding social environment.

2. Method

In this study, the researcher used a qualitative descriptive method, a framework that focuses on the interpretation of non-numerical data such as words and observable phenomena in a text. As emphasized by Darmawan (2025), this method plays a crucial role in characterizing the complex psychological states and social events experienced by literary characters through linguistic expressions and detailed interpretations. This approach aligns with Creswell's (2014) principles, which state that qualitative analysis aims to understand the meaning of human experience based on verbal descriptions rather than statistical measurements. Thus, this method provides a rich account of how Marianne and Connell navigate their respective identity formation and crises.

The subjects of this study are the two main characters in Sally Rooney's novel *Normal People*, Marianne and Connell. The selection of these characters is based on their unique psychological experiences and on a longitudinal view of their development, qualities not found in other minor characters. This research focuses specifically on their identity development within the Sligo secondary school environment, culminating in their transition to higher education at Trinity College, Dublin. The unit of analysis in this study consists of specific narrative segments, dialogues, and internal monologues, which serve as the primary material for dissecting how the subject's identity is formed under the pressure of different social structures.

The data in this study were collected through documentation techniques that focused on primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were obtained directly from the novel through in-depth close reading, while secondary sources were collected from relevant journals and books to enrich the analysis. To ensure methodological rigor, the researcher employed purposive sampling to identify textual data that specifically represent the formation and crisis of the characters' identities. The main instrument was the researcher herself (a human instrument), who served as both data collector and analyst. To minimize bias, the researcher-maintained reflexivity by consistently cross-referencing findings with Lacanian theory, supported by a data inventory table that systematically classified quotations.

For data analysis techniques, this study applies Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic discourse analysis model through a systematic procedural flow. The data collected in the inventory table is classified into three main categories: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. First, the analysis examines the imaginary

order by examining how the characters' egos are built through mirror-like misrecognitions. Second, the symbolic order is examined to see how language and social rules shape people's identities. Finally, the researcher analyzes the Real by pinpointing traumatic events or anxieties that resist symbolization and provoke profound identity crises. To validate these findings, the researcher employed theoretical triangulation by juxtaposing the textual evidence with various psychoanalytic sources. The last step is to put all these findings together to determine how the characters' identities change as their surroundings shift.

3. Result

The data presented in the previous section demonstrates how Marianne and Connell each experience identity formation and crisis in different ways. Although the research findings on these two figures are discussed separately, within each domain, interrelated patterns of how subjects develop identities, as seen through a Lacanian lens, emerge.

Marianne Sheridan: The Construction of the Subject

Marianne Sheridan's psychological journey in *Normal People* reveals a complex, often contradictory process of subject formation. Her identity is not formed in a linear fashion, but rather through a continuous negotiation between the domestic trauma she carries from home and the demands of the symbolic order in her environment. This section will examine how Marianne attempts to rebuild herself amid varying social pressures, from the devastating alienation in Sligo to her efforts to establish an elite identity at Trinity College. Using a three-part Lacanian lens, this analysis will show that although Marianne successfully transforms her social image, she remains trapped in an internal struggle to reconcile past wounds with the new identity she has created.

Marianne in Sligo: The Tripartite Formation of a Fragmented Subject

An analysis of Marianne's psychological self-formation in Sligo reveals how the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real served as the initial foundation for their identity formation. According to Lacan, the Imaginary Order is a psychological theory that holds that the human system forms a self-image through visual perception and the recognition of others. This perspective suggests that a person's identity is not formed independently but rather the result of the interaction between how individuals see themselves and how they are perceived by others.

As an initial finding, on page 2, Marianne is portrayed as someone who isolates herself from her school's social structure. The school environment fosters a negative perception of Marianne, making her the target of social exclusion within her school community. This is reflected in the following quote:

She exercises an open contempt for people in school. She has no friends and spends her lunch-times alone reading novels. A lot of people really hate her. Her father died when she was thirteen and Connell has heard she has a mental illness now or something. It's true she is the smartest person in school. (Rooney, 2018, p. 2)

In Marianne's case, Marianne's identity in Sligo embodies a crisis within the imaginary order, where a split in the subject occurs between the eye and the gaze within a social field where other people's views determine who you are or what is commonly referred to as the scopic field (Lacan, 1977, p. 73). Internally, Marianne attempts to construct a self-image through an eye that views the world cynically; however, this image shatters because she is constantly caught by the gaze from an environment that positions her as an object of hatred, such as someone with a mental illness. Marianne's failure to form an ego ideal that harmonizes with her school's social perceptions results in her becoming a split subject, in which her imaginary identity no longer functions as a protector but rather as a space of isolation that alienates her from herself.

The labels assigned to Marianne within the school environment further complicate her identity. Language functions as a symbolic network that shapes her standing before she can define herself, such as when the narrative mentions that "some people thought she was the ugliest girl in school" (Rooney, 2018, p. 24). According to Lacan (1977), human existence is dominated by the Symbolic order, in which "the Word" has absolute power to condemn one's existence. Consequently, Marianne's identity as an outcast is not a biological fact but a "law of the acts" imposed by the school community (the Other).

The construction of Marianne's identity does not stop at external labels in the school environment, but is also closely linked to the domestic structure through her mother, Denise's, wishes. This is illustrated in the narrative on page 65:

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Denise decided a long time ago that it is acceptable for men to use aggression towards Marianne as a way of expressing themselves. As a child Marianne resisted, but now she simply detaches, as if it isn't of any interest to her, which in a way it isn't. Denise considers this a symptom of her daughter's frigid and unlovable personality. She believes Marianne lacks 'warmth,' by which she means the ability to beg for love from people who hate her. (Rooney, 2018, p. 65)

This narrative reveals Denise's tendency to normalize aggression as a form of self-expression, thus occupying the position of the Other that shapes Marianne's identity through destructive desires. Based on the principle that "Man's desire is the desire of the Other" (Lacan, 1977, p. 235), Marianne's view of herself as unlovable isn't something she was born with; it comes from her mother's wishes. In this complex relationship, Marianne starts to reflect Denise's wish to see her as an object of aggression. As a result, she begins to crave her own isolation to fulfill this unrealistic expectation. So, her decision to escape isn't a true act of freedom; it

shows what the Other wants her to be—a fundamentally unlovable person.

Furthermore, the narrative depicts the repetitive physical violence and psychological pressure Marianne experiences in her home in Sligo. The physical violence Marianne faces in Sligo shows the link between her identity crisis and the attack on reality. This trauma manifests as *tuché*, which Lacan (1977) describes as a traumatic engagement with Reality that is not assimilated by the linguistic or symbolic order (p. 54). Marianne's decision to detach signifies a *touché* so painful it cannot be expressed. Because this trauma cannot be processed symbolically, the subject is unconsciously drawn back to confront the same point of pain—a failed attempt to confront the past that results in a repetitive pattern of allowing herself to be hurt without resistance. This suggests that the trauma is no longer an external event but has become an integral part of her shattered identity. Thus, what appears to others as mere bad luck is, for Marianne, a traumatic certainty that continues to dictate her self-view as an unlovable subject.

Marianne's existence in Sligo represents a fragmented subjectivity where her identity is constructed through rejection. Her acceptance of a masochistic role within the social and domestic gaze demonstrates how the Symbolic Order can entrap a subject into a cycle of perceived unworthiness and alienation.

Marianne at Trinity College: The Tripartite Reconstruction of the Sovereign Subject

The impact of the physical abuse and psychological pressure Marianne experienced in Sligo significantly damaged her self-perception, a burden she carried into her life at Trinity College. Instead of seeing herself as a whole person, she internalized negative treatment into a fractured self-identity, stating, "Well, 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, p. 101). This excerpt demonstrates that Marianne has created a false image of herself, believing that her sense of worthlessness is a permanent part of who she is. This corresponds to Lacan's (1977) notion of the *Gestalt*, or mirror image, which functions as a mirage because it originates in exteriority rather than from within (p. 2). For Marianne, this reflection does not offer strength. Instead, it creates a sense of coldness from her negative past experiences. This negative image exerts a powerful influence. Instead of Marianne forming her own identity, her whole thought process is shaped by these outside cruelties. So, she doesn't see this coldness as an objective truth; instead, she sees it as the complete and permanent self-identity that her environment reflects, which makes her feel like she is not really herself.

Marianne's feelings of worthlessness lead her into a negative relationship with Lukas, where she allows herself to be treated like a worthless object. Instead of fighting back, Marianne accepts all of Lukas's insults as a way to fill the inner emptiness she feels. This shows that Marianne fully accepts the negative judgments given by others, whereas she feels more comfortable when she is not in control of

her own life, as explained in the novel's quote on page 190:

You're worthless, Lukas likes to tell her. You're nothing. And she feels like nothing, an absence to be forcibly filled in. It isn't that she likes the feeling, but it relieves her somehow. Then she showers and the game is over. She experiences a depression so deep it is tranquillising, she eats whatever he tells her to eat, she experiences no more ownership over her own body than if it were a piece of litter. (Rooney, 2018, p. 190)

As Lacan (1977) states, if the subject's position is concentric, then there is harmony between the external label (the signifier) and the internal feeling (the signified), so that the subject can remain the center of his or her own identity. However, in Marianne's case, she occupies an eccentric position, where her self-identity deviates from the label imposed by the Other. By allowing herself to be defined by nothingness, Marianne loses sovereignty over her body as if it were a piece of litter. The tranquilizing depression she experiences reveals both her relief and her total surrender to the sign others have bestowed upon her. In this eccentric space, she no longer has ownership over her own meaning; she is entirely dictated by the language of the Other. Paradoxically, this state makes her feel relieved because it is easier to exist as a passive object defined by someone else's words than to navigate the fragile and shattered reality of her own inner being.

Furthermore, Marianne's belief in her own worthlessness leads her to suppress past wounds that never truly heal. She feels that all her attempts to be a good person or behave normally as society demands are merely masks to cover up something dark inside her. This causes Marianne to view herself as flawed, with all the memories of the violence she experienced fused and buried deep within her body, as expressed in the novel's quote on pages 240-241:

Things that happened to her then are buried in the earth of her body. She tries to be a good person. But deep down she knows she is a bad person, corrupted, wrong, and all her efforts to be right, to have the right opinions, to say the right things, these efforts only disguise what is buried inside her, the evil part of herself. (Rooney, 2018, pp. 240-241)

This condition represents the Real as an indigestible (unassimilable) trauma that exceeds the subject's conscious processing (Lacan, 1977, p. 55). As an unconscious force "buried in the earth of her body," this trauma functions as a foreign object that determines Marianne's subsequent psychological development. While its influence may appear as a series of chance events (accidental origins), Lacan (1977) asserts that such trauma is the primary driving force haunting a subject's life patterns. For Marianne, her drive toward self-abasement and the perception of being wrong are not choices, but the inevitable results of this unassimilable reality. She remains alienated because this internal reality, governed by trauma, remains permanently within her body—dictating her self-view as a fundamentally corrupted subject.

Marianne's transition to Trinity reinforces her eccentric identity, where her self-worth is surrendered to destructive symbolic labels and the persistent haunting of the Real. Her identity remains alienated, governed by the traumatic shadows of her Sligo past.

Connell Waldron: The Deconstruction of The Self

While Marianne's journey is one of gradual construction, Connell Waldron's narrative in *Normal People* represents a profound deconstruction of the subject. Influenced by his shifting home, school, and university environments, Connell's identity is not built on internal stability but is instead a fragile architecture sustained by his obsession with reputation and a paralyzing fear of social judgment. This section examines how his initial reliance on social signifiers eventually leads to a psychological breakdown, revealing that the "stability" he maintained in Sligo was merely a prelude to the total disintegration of his self-image in Trinity.

Connell in Sligo: The Tripartite Stability of a Fragile Identity

Connell constructs an identity based on his peers' reflections, trapped in an obsession with maintaining a normal image. This is evident when the narrative describes his social standing: "He's studious, he plays centre forward in football, he's good-looking, he doesn't get into fights. Everybody likes him. He's quiet" (Rooney, 2018, p. 32). This excerpt characterizes Connell as an intelligent student and a reliable athlete, showing a strong identification with an ideal social image. In line with Lacan's (1977) theory of the mirror stage, this process must be understood as an identification in the broadest sense—a transformation that occurs in the subject when he actively assumes an image that represents himself perfectly (p. 2).

In this context, being a studious student and a center-forward athlete functions as an imago—a visual representation of a complete and ideal self in the eyes of others. Connell does not simply possess these traits; he undergoes a psychic transformation where his sense of self (the function of the "I") is built entirely on this perfect social mask. By identifying with this image, he ensures social acceptance, as confirmed by the phrase "Everybody likes him." However, this identification is fundamentally alienating; he becomes so obsessed with the perfect image that it only masks his underlying mental fragility, creating a self that exists more for others than for himself.

The internal burden of keeping his relationship with Marianne a secret creates a profound disconnect between Connell's public persona and his private reality. He describes this pressure as carrying an "overfull tray of hot drinks" that he must never spill (Rooney, 2018, p. 22). According to Lacan (1977), there is a structural disconnect in social interaction: others never look at the subject from the exact position from which the subject sees them (p. 103). In the school

environment, Connell's friends see him only as a popular athlete, while from his own place, he sees a subject burdened by the invisible "hot tray" of his secret. His anxiety about social judgment is a manifestation of Lacan's (1977) perspective on the split that occurs between the eye (the physical ability to see) and the gaze (the social standards that judge).

His anxiety about social judgment is a manifestation of Lacan's (1977) perspective on the split that occurs between the eye (the physical ability to see) and the gaze (the social standards that judge). This pervasiveness of the gaze is vividly illustrated when Connell imagines the catastrophic consequences of his secret being revealed:

If people found out what he has been doing with Marianne, in secret, while ignoring her every day in school, his life would be over. He would walk down the hallway and people's eyes would follow him, like he was a serial killer, or worse. His friends don't think of him as a deviant person, a person who could say to Marianne Sheridan, in broad daylight, completely sober: Is it okay if I come in your mouth? With his friends he acts normal. He and Marianne have their own private life in his room where no one can bother them, so there's no reason to mix up the separate worlds. (Rooney, 2018, pp. 27)

In this scopic field, the split between the eye and the gaze triggers a psychic drive that forces the subject to constantly organize and manipulate his self-image in order to meet the social requirements he imagines are judging him (Lacan, 1977, p. 73). While the eye refers to the literal sight of his friends in the corridor, the gaze functions as an anonymous, pervasive power of surveillance that labels him as a deviant or serial killer in his own mind. Consequently, Connell's drive to maintain separate worlds proves that he is imaginatively alienated; he is not reacting to what people actually see but to the rigid moral standards of the Other that he has internalized.

Connell's efforts to balance his public image and private life ultimately reached a breaking point when Marianne decided to leave school. As the narrative describes, "After Marianne left school in April, Connell entered a period of low spirits" (Rooney, 2018, p. 73). This moment of "low spirits" marks a collapse in his daily psychological functioning. From a Lacanian perspective, a subject's life is generally regulated by the automaton—routines that function automatically under the pleasure principle to maintain comfort within the social order (Lacan, 1977, pp. 53-54). Connell's status as a popular athlete served as this automaton, providing a sense of safety and social acceptance. However, Marianne's departure destroys this comfortable routine, causing the automaton to stop functioning. This rupture forcibly brings forth the real, a traumatic reality that cannot be symbolized and has been hidden behind the insistence of signs of his popular status. Consequently, Connell is no longer governed by the pleasure principle; instead, he encounters the return of repressed elements from behind his automatic routine. The signs of his

social success become meaningless as he confronts the bitter reality and emptiness of his identity. In other words, the object's (Marianne's) departure halts the automaton's function and reveals the traumatic reality that had been lying behind his normal facade all along, leaving him no longer feeling safe in the regularity of his life.

Connell's identity in Sligo is an automaton of social conformity, sustained by a fragile imaginary-symbolic balance. While he maintains a cohesive self-image through the validation of his peers, this stability merely masks the real, manifesting as a repressed anxiety and an unnameable tension between his private desires and the social gaze.

Connell at Trinity College: The Tripartite Collapse and Cognitive Disintegration

Connell's mental health reached a critical point when he transferred to the prestigious Trinity College. The change made the self-image and social structures that had supported him in Sligo useless. He faced a crisis of self-confidence and felt out of place. This situation shows his struggle to connect with his new reality and his frustration in forming social bonds.

...about how hard it is to make friends in Trinity...People here are such snobs. Even if they liked me I honestly wouldn't want to be friends with them...That's why it's easy for you, by the way, he said. Because you're from a rich family, that's why people like you. (Rooney, 2018, pp. 89)

Lacan (1977) defines the mirror stage as the phase that establishes a relationship between the *Innenwelt* (inner world) and the *Umwelt* (outer environment) (p. 2). In this context, a rupture occurs between Connell's *Innenwelt*, which is still tied to his popular identity in Sligo, and the foreign *Umwelt* of Trinity. Without a "social mirror" that recognizes his existence, Connell's relationship with reality is destroyed. His inability to find an *imago* in harmony with this new social environment leaves him fragmented; he is a subject that no longer recognizes itself in the reflection of his peers.

Connell's struggle to see himself in the strange setting of Trinity pushes him to find different ways to fix his damaged social status. He looks for approval from others through his relationship with Helen, using it as a way to create a normal self-image and earn acceptance in Dublin's social scene. This effort to solidify his identity through outside influence is shown in the novel.

...he feels a rush of pride, and hopes that people are watching them. To be known as her boyfriend plants him firmly in the social world, establishes him as an acceptable person, someone with a particular status, someone whose conversational silences are thoughtful rather than socially awkward. (Rooney, 2018, pp. 155)

This phenomenon illustrates the concept of eccentricity, where the center of identity shifts outside the self (Lacan, 1977, p. 125). In this eccentric condition, Connell loses sovereignty over his own meaning because his identity is no longer determined by internal integrity but is entirely defined by the labels imposed by the social world. He occupies the position of a subject of the signifier through his roles as a "normal boyfriend" or "accepted student"—an identity whose center lies outside of himself because it is heavily dependent on the recognition of the Other.

Despite the apparent external validation, Connell's inner self remains riddled with anxiety, shame, and isolation. Prioritizing social markers (status) over his inner truth, he experiences symbolic alienation; he feels more real when others view him as an ideal than when he faces his own shattered mental reality. This shift confirms that Connell's position is no longer concentric, as there is a profound dissonance between the external signifiers, he adopts to please the social gaze and the internal reality he perceives. Instead of achieving a state where his self-image and inner essence are in harmony, he remains trapped in an eccentric space where his identity is dictated by the gaze, so that the signified subject remains alienated from the signifying subject.

Connell's defenses, previously shaped by social labels through his relationship with Helen, crumble when confronted with the death of his best friend in Sligo, Rob. This traumatic event shatters the foundations he had built to adapt to his new social environment, as the narrative describes how "the whole cognitive framework by which he made sense of the world had disintegrated for good, and everything from then on would just be undifferentiated sound and colour" (Rooney, 2018, p. 206). From Lacan's point of view, this condition shows a break in the Real.

The world loses its meaning because the insistence of signs has completely collapsed. The subject can no longer translate experience into language. Lacan (1977) posits that the Real transcends the automaton's capabilities and the routines dictated by the pleasure principle (p. 53). When Connell looks at his surroundings and sees only a blur of sounds and colors that hold no meaning, he is experiencing the return of a traumatic event that he cannot express.

This situation shows how he struggles to connect his feelings with an outside world that no longer makes sense (Rahmadhani & Adrallisman, 2025). Consequently, Connell is stripped of social masks or labels. He faces the harsh, unspoken truth of loss, where the once-normal world changes into a traumatic space that he cannot understand or cope with.

Connell's journey at Trinity represents a total tripartite collapse. Having lost the social markers that anchored him in Sligo, he is forced into a direct encounter with the Real through the trauma of grief. This rupture leads to a cognitive disintegration in which his imaginary self-image shatters, and his symbolic language fails, leaving him unable to symbolize his existence or sustain a cohesive sense of self.

4. Discussion

The comparison of Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron's psychological journeys shows a significant difference in how they experience Lacan's three orders. This study reveals that both characters have what Lacan (1977) calls an eccentric identity. For them, the essence of who they are does not come from within but from the Other. Marianne forms her identity through a lack within the domestic Symbolic Order, while Connell's identity is based on a "surplus" of social approval. This research assesses this eccentricity as an unstable foundation. It builds on the work of Rahmadhani & Adrallisman (2025), arguing that a seemingly "successful" social identity, like Connell's popularity, is just as fragile and isolating as a marginalized one. Both characters show that when identity relies entirely on the validation of the Other, a person remains in a constant state of vulnerability.

This reliance on symbolic structures eventually breaks down when the insistence of signs fails to connect with reality. For Connell, the identity crisis starts with Rob's death, which destroys his cognitive framework. This framework acted like a machine that gave him a feeling of belonging. Without these social markers, he confronts the Real, where language fails and the world becomes a mix of indistinct sounds and colors. On the other hand, Marianne's crisis is not a sudden external collapse but a constant, internal cycle of unprocessed trauma. This trauma behaves like a foreign object inside her, showing up as a painful repetition. By examining these patterns, this study shows that an identity crisis involves more than emotional distress; it represents a structural problem where a person finds themselves unnamed by a reality they can no longer express.

Furthermore, the journey of these two characters makes an important contribution to Lacanian identity theory and psychoanalytic literary studies. This research challenges the conventional view of identity development. It suggests that identity is actually a continuous deconstruction. It offers a new way to understand the modern subject as someone who cannot form a truly independent identity due to the pressure of the gaze. The wider significance of this study shows how unresolved trauma and social labels turn the self into a battleground. Here, the desire for recognition clashes with the reality of inner destruction. Ultimately, this analysis emphasizes that in the postmodern world, identity is never complete. It is an ongoing tension between the symbolic mask and the traumatic real.

5. Conclusion

Based on research findings and discussions, the identity crises experienced by Marianne and Connell stem from eccentric self-formation. Their respective identities lack a stable inner core but are entirely dependent on the Symbolic Order (Connell's thirst for social validation and domestic recognition, which is traumatic for Marianne). The social influence on this formation is clearly visible when their external support wavers, which inevitably forces them to confront reality. For Connell, the crisis becomes apparent when the functions of language and social

logic are lost (the automaton's collapse). Conversely, for Marianne, this crisis manifests in a cycle of self-deprecation due to unprocessed trauma in her conscious system. This research shows that labeling by others is purely a process subjects engage in to form their identities. This results in vulnerability to psychological collapse when the symbolic order no longer provides meaning to their existence.

This study is limited by its reliance on a Lacanian perspective, which focuses heavily on the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real aspects of identity formation and the crises each character experiences. Therefore, broader socioeconomic factors related to class differences between Sligo and Trinity are not included in the discussion. Based on these findings, future studies on identity crises could be conducted on various digital media platforms or other contemporary novels to compare how modern individuals negotiate their sense of self in different cultural contexts.

A combined approach, such as psychology and sociology, can provide insight into how social labels can impact a person's mental health. This research emphasizes the importance of portraying complex and realistic characters in popular narratives to provide writers and literary critics with a perspective on how unprocessed trauma manifests in destructive behavior. A deeper understanding of this identity's fragility will likely encourage readers and connoisseurs of literary works to be more critical in their examination of the relationship between social demands and individuals' psychological stability in contemporary society.

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