



Interpersonal Character Development of the Main Characters in Sally Rooney's Normal People Novel (2018)

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Received: 2026-04-28 Revised: 2026 05-04 Accepted: 2026 05-13</p> <p>Keywords: Character development; character and characterization; Interpersonal relationship</p> <p>DOI: 10.24256/ideasv14i1.10343</p> <p>Corresponding Author: Dwi Putri Apriliany dwipaapr@gmail.com English Literature, Sunan Gunung Djati Islamic State University, West Java</p>	<p><i>This study examines the interpersonal character development of Marianne and Connell in Sally Rooney's novel Normal People (2018). The objective is to analyze how their relationship acts as a catalyst for their transformation into round characters and to identify the characterization techniques used to portray this growth. The analysis focuses on three dimensions of personality complexity which are self-perception, relational power/social position, and emotional vulnerability. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with an objective literary criticism approach and applies the theory of character and characterization by E. M. Forster as the main theory, along with characterization theories by Robert Stanton and Hawthorn. The results show that Marianne and Connell experience significant transformations due to the interpersonal relationships they go through. Marianne develops from a socially isolated individual with low self-esteem into someone who gains social acceptance and has a healthier understanding of emotional dependence. Meanwhile, Connell develops from an individual who has social stability but is internally vulnerable into someone who becomes aware of his emotional needs and is able to express his vulnerability to Marianne. This development confirms that both characters are complex and dynamic round characters. In addition, Rooney mainly uses indirect characterization techniques through narration, dialogue, and the characters' thoughts, which allow readers to understand the characters' development processes in depth, while direct characterization is used in a limited way to build the initial image of the characters. Therefore, interpersonal relationships play a key role as the main mechanism in driving character development in this novel.</i></p>

1. Introduction

In life, every individual experiences a process of growth and change. They do not remain the same throughout their lives. They will experience a process of from knowing nothing to understanding many things, from unable to do some things to becoming skilled, and from having bad attitudes to becoming more positives (Haryanto et al., 2023). This process is commonly referred to as character development.

Character development can be understood as the process of creating characters with depth, personality, and clear motivations, so that the characters are not one-dimensional (Lole et al., 2024). It reflects a gradual transformation of attitudes, emotions, and behavior shaped by both internal factors such as personality, moral values, and individual beliefs, also external factors, such as interpersonal relationships, family, social environment, culture, and society (Ramadhan et al., 2023). While internal psychological factors influence personal growth, external relational dynamics, particularly interpersonal relationships, play a significant role in shaping self-perception, emotional maturity, and behavioral adjustment (Dahrul et al., 2022).

Through interpersonal interactions, individuals learn how to communicate, understand emotions, manage conflict, and build relationships. Interpersonal relationships often influence how people see themselves and others. Positive relationships may help individuals grow emotionally, while unhealthy relationships may cause emotional problems, insecurity, or confusion (Wulandari & Rahmi, 2018).

As social beings, individuals construct meaning about themselves through communication, attachment, and relational negotiation with others. These dynamics become increasingly complex during young adulthood, a period characterized by identity exploration, emotional instability, and social pressure (Branje et al., 2021). Romantic relationships and peer interactions frequently function as catalysts for emotional growth and self-definition (Costello et al., 2023).

Literature often serves as a medium for representing these complex human experiences. As a form of creative expression reflecting human experience (AGM et al., 2019), literary works portray interpersonal relationships not merely as narrative background but as structural forces that shape character transformation. Through characters in narrative fiction, authors convey ideas, values, and emotional experiences to readers (Abrams & Harpham, 2013).

Character development in narrative fiction is often reflected through a character arc, which illustrates changes in a character's values, perspectives, and self-awareness because of narrative events (Chrisfenianti et al., 2023). As a result, at the end of the story, there is a clear difference between the character's initial and final conditions. From a structuralist perspective, such development can be analyzed through the intrinsic elements of literary works, especially the plot and conflict, which serve as the main triggers for character change (Munti et al., 2023).

This study is grounded in character theory, particularly E. M. Forster's theory of character and characterization. Forster (1927) classifies characters into flat and round types. Flat characters are typically presented through concise and explicit description, while round characters are developed through more complex and gradual revelation. Forster also implicitly employ the terms direct or indirect characterization in his discussion of character portrayal, including his discussion of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, suggests that characters can be constructed through both direct description and more subtle narrative techniques through actions, tone, and implication rather than explicit explanation.

Supporting this framework, theory of methods of characterization proposed by Hawthorn (2023) are used to analyze how dialogue, action, and narrative description construct and reveal character development. Another supporting theory is from Stanton (1965) who explains that character is a central element in fiction that can be understood through the interplay of actions, dialogue, and relationships with other characters within the narrative structure.

In addition to character theory, this study also applies the concept of interpersonal relationship. Interpersonal relationships, particularly as explained by DeVito (1997, as cited in Wulandari et al., 2018) and Sullivan (as cited in Sagimin & Damayanti, 2019), involve interaction, intimacy, and conflict that shape individuals' self-perception and emotional development. In literary narratives, these relational dynamics function as mechanisms that drive character transformation.

One contemporary novel that portrays character development influenced by interpersonal relationship is *Normal People* (2018) by Sally Rooney. The novel narrates the evolving relationship between Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron from adolescence to early adulthood. Their relationship is marked by miscommunication, emotional dependency, class differences, insecurity, and shifting social positions. Rather than presenting development as an isolated internal process, the narrative emphasizes how interpersonal interaction becomes the primary mechanism through which both characters negotiate identity and emotional vulnerability.

Several previous studies have examined *Normal People* from sociological and psychological perspectives. Nasronuddin (2023) analyzes social stratification in the novel using Weber's theory, showing how class, status, and social mobility shape the characters' positions across different environments. Similarly, Fauzi (2025) through a Marxist approach, highlights how class differences influence the romantic relationship between Marianne and Connell, creating insecurity, misunderstanding, and emotional barriers.

In contrast, Rahmawati (2021) focuses on social conflict and its impact on Marianne's emotional and psychological development, emphasizing how interpersonal tensions within family and peer relationships shape her character. Meanwhile, Rahmadhani (2024) examines Connell's anxiety from a psychological

perspective, identifying different types of anxiety that influence his behavior and emotional state.

These studies share a common focus on external social and psychological factors affecting the characters. However, they differ in their analytical emphasis, as each study isolates a specific issue, such as class, conflict, or anxiety. As a result, character development is examined partially rather than as a continuous process shaped by interpersonal relationships.

Based on the previous studies, there is a lack of integrated interpersonal relationship and characterization analysis using E. M. Forster's theory. Furthermore, most studies focus on individual characters rather than analyzing the interpersonal development of both main characters simultaneously.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the interpersonal character development of Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron using Forster's theory. It focuses on how their relationship contributes to their complexity as round characters and how characterization techniques are used to portray this development.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze: (1) How does Sally Rooney portray the interpersonal character development of Marianne and Connell throughout the narrative? and (2) What characterization techniques (direct and indirect) are employed to reveal their character development?

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze interpersonal character development in *Normal People* (2018). Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it focuses on interpreting textual data and understanding complex human phenomena through detailed description rather than numerical analysis (Cresswell, 2018; Fadli, 2021).

This study applies an objective literary criticism approach. According to Abrams (1999, as cited in Nurrachman, 2023), an objective approach treats literary works as something independent of what are often referred to as extrinsic elements that must be understood through their own elements, such as intrinsic elements. Therefore, in this study, the researcher used an objective critical approach because the analysis focused on intrinsic elements such as character, characterization, and narrative structure, without considering external factors.

The primary analytical technique used is close reading, which involves careful and repeated examination of the text to identify significant patterns, themes, and character transformations. Close reading is the activity of reading carefully to understand the content of the reading deeply.

Data Sources

The primary data sources in this research are text in *Normal People* (2018), a novel by Sally Rooney that published in 2018 by Faber & Faber Ltd. The data source of this research is *Normal People* (2018) by Sally Rooney. The data consist of textual excerpts in the form of narration, dialogue, and characters' thoughts that reflect the interpersonal development of the main characters, Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron.

The selected data are limited to textual excerpts that represent three analytical dimensions which are self-perception, relational power and social position, and emotional vulnerability that derived from the characteristics of round characters, emphasizing personality complexity.

Data Collection

The data were collected through close reading, focusing on the texts that reflect the interpersonal character development of the main characters, Marianne and Connell.

In this study, the researcher functioned as the primary instrument, responsible for selecting, interpreting, and categorizing the data while maintaining the original context of each excerpt to ensure accurate analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted through a systematic qualitative procedure. First, the researcher conducted an intensive reading to identify personality complexity and character development as indicators of round characters in *Normal People*, based on Forster's (1927) concept of round characters.

Second, the data were categorized into three dimensions: self-perception, relational power, and emotional vulnerability. These dimensions serve to measure Forster's (1927) criteria for round characters, specifically their internal complexity and ability to change. By connecting these dimensions to interpersonal concepts, the researcher can clearly track how the characters' depth is built through their social interactions.

In addition, the data were also coded based on characterization techniques, namely direct and indirect characterization, based on Stanton (1965) and Hawthorn (2023) characterization theory, to examine how character complexity and changes is represented.

Third, the categorized data were analyzed to interpret how changes across the three dimensions reflect character development and how interpersonal interactions contribute to these changes. In cases where a single excerpt reflects multiple dimensions, the analysis prioritizes the most dominant dimension.

The findings were interpreted using Forster's concept of round characters to determine the complexity and developmental capacity of the characters. To ensure analytical rigor, the analysis was conducted consistently using a clear framework and supported by direct textual evidence. This approach helps minimize subjective bias and enhances the credibility of the analysis.

3. Result & Discussion

This section presents findings derived from a textual analysis of the novel *Normal People* (2018). According to E. M. Forster (1927), round characters are characterized by complexity and the capacity for development. They are psychologically deep, dynamic, capable of change in response to experiences throughout the narrative, also characters who can convincingly surprise the reader.

Forster also argues that a round character has depth and personality complexity that become more apparent as the story progresses (Surjowati, 2013). Unlike flat characters, round characters cannot be reduced to a single trait, as they display multiple dimensions of personality and evolve over time.

In *Normal People* (2018), both Marianne and Connell demonstrate these characteristics through significant transformations. Their complexity is reflected in the shifts of their self-perception, relational power and social position, and emotional vulnerability.

These dimensions are used to examine how their development is constructed. Furthermore, this analysis highlights how interpersonal relationships function as the central mechanism driving these transformations. The finding will be divided into two sub discussion:

- (1) Round Character and Characterization Techniques
- (2) Interpersonal Character Development

Round Character and Characterization Techniques

1. Complexity Through Self-Perception

A. Marianne Character

Sally Rooney depicts Marianne's complexity in the transformation of her self-perception. At the beginning, Marianne is positioned as an individual who is socially isolated, has no friends, and is being disliked by her peers. This is reflected in the narrative, "*She has no friends and spends her lunch times alone reading novels. A lot people really hate her.*" (Rooney, 2018, p. 2).

This quote suggests that Marianne's identity at the beginning of the story is largely shaped by external factors. She has almost no control over how others perceive her. Since no one likes her, she has grown accustomed living in a "box" of isolation.

This extreme social rejection later forms an internal belief that she is a cold person and unworthy of being loved. This is evident in Marianne's dialogue, "*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)

The quotation indicates that Marianne begins to believe that something is wrong with her. She sees herself as "cold" and difficult to like. It suggests that continuous social rejection can damage the way a person perceives their inner self.

Furthermore, the quotation shows that Marianne does not merely experience rejection, but internalizes it as part of her identity. In other words, her self-perception is shaped by others' views, making it difficult for her to develop an independent understanding of herself, and her identity becomes the result of repeated social construction until she enters university.

However, this perception undergoes a fundamental shift after her interaction with Connell, where she begins to see their relationship as the starting point of a "new life". This is evident in the following narrative:

"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, p. 44).

This quotation marks a significant turning point. With Connell, Marianne feels that her previously bitter life is replaced, leading her to describe it as a "new life."

This suggests that love and acceptance from even one person can be powerful enough to counter the rejection of many others. She begins to feel that she is "worthy" of being loved.

Marianne also acknowledges that the pain of past loneliness is nothing compared to the pain of feeling worthless, a burden that is lifted by Connell's presence. This is demonstrated in the narrative:

"But for her the pain of loneliness will be nothing to the pain that she used to feel, of being unworthy. He brought her goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her." (Rooney, 2018, p. 266)

In the narrative, Marianne uses the word "gift" because she feels that her sense of confidence does not come from within herself, but rather as something "given" by Connell. Although this makes her happy, the quotation also shows that Marianne still depends heavily on Connell to feel that she is a good person. That sense of goodness is now "hers," but it is Connell who opens the door to it.

This shift from self-rejection to self-acceptance demonstrates Marianne's psychological depth and capacity for development. Her changing self-perception reflects personality complexity, as she evolves over time rather than remaining fixed. Therefore, Marianne can be categorized as a round character in line with E. M. Forster theory.

Rooney mainly uses indirect characterization techniques through narration, dialogue, and the character's thoughts. At the early stage, readers understand Marianne's isolation through objective narration

about her social behavior at school and dialogue that shows self-loathing (Rooney, 2018, p. 2, 101).

As the story progresses, Rooney shifts to narration that enters Marianne's internal reflection or thoughts to show her transformation (Rooney, 2018, p. 44). The use of data about Marianne's feelings of becoming "worthy" after knowing Connell is also a form of thought technique that reveals her inner depth (Rooney, 2018, p. 266).

This is in line with Hawthorn's theory (2023) that indirect characterization gives space for readers to conclude how the character is through what the character says and thinks. By using a combination of narration, dialogue, and thought, Rooney successfully reveals the layers of Marianne's personality and reinforces her status as a dynamic character.

B. Connell Character

Connell's complexity is also evident in his evolving self-perception. At the beginning of the story, Connell experiences an identity crisis where he feels like two different people.

On the one side, there is "popular Connell," who is liked by his peers, and on the other side, there is the "real Connell," who feels exhausted from constantly wearing a mask due to the pressure of social expectations.

He feels that the world demands him to choose one version of himself as he enters university, causing him to feel divided and internally fragmented. This is reflected in the following narrative:

"Lately he's consumed by a sense that he is in fact 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. 26)

Although he is popular at school, he holds deep feelings of isolation and feels disliked when he moves to a new environment. When he moves to a new environment, which is university life at Trinity College Dublin, and is no longer a "popular kid," his greatest fear becomes real, he feels that people do not like him. This suggests that Connell's confidence is fragile, as it relies heavily on others' opinions. This is demonstrated through Connell's dialogue,

"It's familiar, I suppose. I would say in school I sometimes had that feeling of isolation or whatever. But people liked me and everything. Here I feel like people don't like me that much." (Rooney, 2018, p. 216).

However, through his interactions with Marianne during school and university, Connell's self-perception begins to change because he finds a safe space to be himself without social judgement as shown in the following narrative,

"With Marianne it was different, because everything was between them only, even awkward or difficult things. He could do or say anything he wanted with her and no one would ever find out." (Rooney, 2018, p. 21).

The quotation shows that Marianne is the only person who can make Connell feel "whole." With her, he is able to be himself without fear of judgment. Their relationship can be seen as a space where he finds relief from the pressures of the others.

This transformation reaches its peak when he acknowledges how much Marianne's support helps him through difficult times and depression as evident in the following dialogue,

"You really have been so supportive of me, he says. What with the depression and everything, not to linger on that too much, but you really helped me a lot." (Rooney, 2018, p. 234).

Connell eventually dares to acknowledge his vulnerability, including the depression he experiences to Marianne. He no longer tries to appear strong or perfect in front of Marianne. By admitting that he needs Marianne's support, Connell demonstrates a shift from someone who is concerned with maintaining his image to a man who is more honest about his own feelings.

His evolving self-perception confirms that he is not a static character, but one who changes in response to experience. Such an analysis is relevant with Forster theory (1927) about round character that they are dynamic because they grow, adapt, or change according to their experiences.

He has a complex inner feeling, he can feel anxious despite being popular, and most importantly, he changes. He learns to move beyond social pressure and to value emotional honesty more. A character like Connell feels "alive" because he continues to grow throughout the story.

Rooney reveals the development of Connell's self-perception through indirect characterization techniques, especially through the use of narration focused on the character's thoughts and dialogue.

According to Hawthorn (2023), this technique requires readers to actively conclude the character's traits through the clues given by the author, both through speech and inner processes.

At the early stage, Connell's inner conflict about his fragmented identity is revealed through narration that enters his thoughts (Rooney, 2018, p. 26, 21). Although it is delivered by the narrator, this data shows Connell's subjective view of himself, so readers can see the contrast between his external popularity and the internal anxiety he feels. Then, Rooney shifts to using dialogue between Connell and Marianne to show the development of his character in his self-perception (Rooney, 2018, p. 216, 234).

The use of a combination of thought and dialogue techniques, in line with Hawthorn's view, is very effective in building Connell as a round character because readers are given the access to see his complex and self-transformation.

2. Complexity Through Shifting Relational Power and Social Position

a. Marianne Character

Sally Rooney depicts Marianne's complexity is evident in the shift of her relational power and social position. At the beginning, in school, Marianne is in a marginal and isolated position, where her social identity and personal orientation become a mystery to those around her as evident in the following narrative,

"Marianne has never been with anyone in school, no one has ever seen her undressed, no one even knows if she likes boys or girls, she won't tell anyone."
(Rooney, 2018, p. 6).

At school, she has no social power at all. Because she withdraws from others, people are free to label and talk about her as they wish. Others' lack of knowledge about her indicates that she occupies the lowest position in the social hierarchy.

This social powerlessness changes drastically after her first separation from Connell, where she transforms into an individual who has social authority in the university environment.

Connell's observation at a party shows that Marianne has a wide circle of friends and appears happy with her new social position as shown in the following narrative,

"From this remark, and from the way she was standing on the steps, he can tell that all these people at the party are her friends, she has a lot of friends, and she's happy."
(Rooney, 2018, p. 72).

The change from an “invisible” person into a socially dominant figure confirms Marianne as a round character according to Forster’s theory (1927).

Her complexity is seen in her ability to adapt and redefine herself in different social contexts, proving that her identity is not static but continues to develop along with changes in her environment and relational power.

Such an analysis is relevant with Forster theory (1927) because Forster said that unlike flat characters, whose actions are predictable, round characters can act in unexpected but believable ways.

In this part, Marianne is constructed through indirect characterization techniques, especially through narrative descriptions of her social behavior and personal boundaries, as well as the perspectives of other characters.

Marianne’s mysterious and isolated personality is not stated explicitly by the author, but is revealed through narration about information about her life experiences and social (Rooney, 2018, p. 6).

Then, Rooney also describes the development of Marianne’s character through Connell’s perspective to show the change in Marianne’s social and relational position from an isolated individual into someone who has wider social acceptance (Rooney, 2018, p. 72).

As stated by Stanton (1965) in his book *An Introduction to Fiction*, the personal description of a character not only helps readers form a visual image, but also plays a role in revealing the character and personality through the details presented in the narrative.

b. Connell Character

Sally Rooney depicts Connell’s complexity through a shift in social position that challenges the stability of his identity. During his school years, Connell is in a very stable position of social power. He is seen as an ideal figure who is liked by everyone because of his intelligence and his academic and non-academic abilities. This is reflected in the narrative,

“Nonetheless Connell is considered quite a catch these days. 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 position provides him with a sense of security and identity within his social environment in school. However, this popularity is, in fact, a burden for Connell.

He is liked because he is “quiet,” which means he has managed to suppress his true self to fit in with others’ expectations. So, his social

status at school is just an illusion because it is built on pretending.

However, this social position collapses when he moves to the university environment, where he loses his “popular” status and instead feels isolated and uncomfortable in crowds as illustrated in the excerpt,

“Now he’s here, standing on his own in a crowded room not knowing whether to take his jacket off. It feels practically scandalous to be lingering around here in solitude. He feels as if everyone around him is disturbed by his presence, and trying not to stare.” (Rooney, 2018, p. 66).

The quotation indicates the collapse of Connell’s confidence when the “public space” that once admired him now feels unfamiliar and intimidating. This is rooted in his sense of inferiority and difference, as he does not come from an upper-class background like Marianne. It suggests that Connell’s earlier social status was not driven by internal desire, but rather shaped by external perceptions and social structures.

This supports E. M. Forster’s (1927) view that round characters are dynamic and capable of change. This shift from social dominance to marginalization reveals the fragility of Connell’s identity and highlights the layered of his personality. His response to changing social contexts demonstrates that he is not a static character, but one who evolves based on his environment.

The change in Connell’s social position is revealed through both indirect characterization and direct characterization techniques used by Sally Rooney.

Connell’s character is explained explicitly through the author’s description of him. He is described as an “ideal” figure in the school environment, with various positive attributes such as being high-achieving, well-liked by many people, and having a good social image (Rooney, 2018, p. 32).

According to E. M. Forster (1927), this is a direct characterization technique in which the writer can portray a character directly through concise description or a single defining statement, making the character easily recognizable and memorable.

Furthermore, Connell’s character is presented through the depiction of his actions and inner thought in a new social situation. Rooney does not directly explain that Connell feels insecure or anxious, but instead shows his situation in a social space and how he interprets that condition (Rooney, 2018, p. 66).

From his action, readers can see that Connell’s behavior shows that he feels uncomfortable in crowds, is overly aware of other people’s presence, and has the perception that others are watching or judging

him negatively. These feelings show Connell's psychological condition as awkward, uneasy, and isolated in his social environment.

This is in line with Stanton's theory (1965), which states that characters in fiction can be understood through what they say, what they do, and how they interact with other characters. Stanton emphasizes that characters are not only explained by the narrator, but are mainly revealed through actions and dialogue in certain situations.

3. Complexity Through Emotional Vulnerability

A. Marianne Character

Sally Rooney depicts Marianne's complexity in the development of her emotional vulnerability, which is initially shaped by her negative self-perception and need for validation.

At the early stage, Marianne shows a tendency to put herself down as a form of acceptance of unhealthy relationships, where she believes that she deserves to be treated badly as long as it fulfills the desires of her partner, Jamie, as reflected in the following dialogue,

"It's not that I get off on being degraded as such, she says. I just like to know that I would degrade myself for someone if they wanted me to. Does that make sense? I don't know if it does, I've been thinking about it. It's about the dynamic, more than what actually happens. Anyway I suggested it to him, that I could try being more submissive. And it turns out he likes to beat me up." (Rooney, 2018, p. 132).

This vulnerability is expressed explicitly through her willingness to place herself in a subordinate position, which reflects her low self-esteem in her position within unhealthy relational dynamics.

Here, Marianne is trying to find a sense of control amid her feelings of low self-worth. She perceives herself as "damaged," and therefore offers herself to be further harmed by Jamie in order to feel that she has a "role" in the relationship.

Marianne believes that by surrendering her self-worth, she is building a connection. However, this reflects a form of emotional masochism rooted in past trauma, shaped by her family environment and her unresolved relationship with Connell. Her vulnerability at this stage is destructive, as she continues to seek validation through pain.

However, as the story develops, there is a significant change in the way Marianne understands emotional dependence. She begins to realize that no individual can completely live without others, so dependence is no longer seen as a weakness, but as a natural part of human relationships. This can be seen in the following narrative,

"No one can be independent of other people completely, so why not give up the attempt, she thought, go running in the other direction, depend on people for everything, allow them to depend on you, why not. She knows he loves her, she doesn't wonder about that anymore." (Rooney, 2018, p. 262).

Marianne no longer views dependence as a form of defeat. If previously she "submitted herself" to be hurt with Jamie, her ex-boyfriend, she now "surrenders herself" to love and be loved with Connell. The shift from the phrase "degrade myself" to "allow them to depend on you" indicates a transformation from a hierarchical (unequal) relationship to a reciprocal one.

Her awareness that she can depend on others while also allowing others to depend on her shows a shift toward a more balanced relationship pattern. In addition, her belief that she is loved by Connell without doubt indicates an improvement in her self-perception as well as a healthier emotional acceptance.

This shift from self-destructive vulnerability to a more stable emotional awareness demonstrates Marianne's personality complexity. Her ability to reinterpret emotional dependence indicates that her character evolves over time, reinforcing her classification as a round character.

Such an analysis is relevant with Forster (1927) about round character because their traits change and develop throughout the story, making them appear more realistic and lifelike.

This emotional vulnerability transformation is revealed by Rooney through indirect characterization techniques using thought and dialogue. According to Hawthorn (2023), characters can be revealed through both conversation and the character's thoughts.

Even though the character does not perform many actions, readers can still understand them deeply through their thought processes, which also reveal past experiences.

In this case, the use of dialogue allows Marianne's vulnerability to be shown directly without the narrator as an intermediary, so readers can understand how she interprets herself in interpersonal relationships (Rooney, 2018, p. 132).

Meanwhile, the thought technique functions to show internal processes that are not spoken, especially in presenting the change in her view of emotional dependence (Rooney, 2018, p. 262).

b. Connell Character

Sally Rooney depicts Connell's complexity through emotional vulnerability that appears as a response to social class inequality and the need for interpersonal support.

At the beginning, Connell is trapped in a deep sense of shame related to his economic position, where he feels unable to talk about money with Marianne because of their family history. This is reflected in the following narrative,

“...It just felt too much like asking her for money. He and Marianne never talked about money. They had never talked, for example, about the fact that her mother paid his mother money to scrub their floors and hang their laundry, or about the fact that this money circulated indirectly to Connell, who spent it, as often as not, on Marianne. He hated having to think about things like that. He knew Marianne never thought that way. She bought him things all the time, dinner, theatre tickets, things she would pay for and then instantly, permanently, forget about.” (Rooney, 2018, p. 122).

Connell feels vulnerable not simply because he is poor, but because of the history of a “servant and employer” relationship between their families, in which his mother works for Marianne’s family. The quotation suggests that Connell’s vulnerability takes the form of shame, causes him to remain silent.

Connell’s inability to express his vulnerability creates a deep gap of miscommunication between him and Marianne. This indicates that communication barriers are not merely technical issues of speaking, but reflect Connell’s internal conflict, as he feels the need to preserve his dignity within a context of class inequality.

His reluctance to be open about his declining mental or financial condition further demonstrates that his identity as a round character is strongly shaped by masculine ego and social stigma. He perceives honesty about his weaknesses as a threat to his position within the relationship.

However, as the story progresses, there is a significant shift where Connell begins to break down his defenses as shown in the following narrative,

“He’s not someone who feels comfortable confiding in others, or demanding things from them. He needs Marianne for this reason. This fact strikes him newly. Marianne is someone he can ask things of. Even though there are certain difficulties and resentments in their relationship, the relationship carries on. This seems remarkable to him now, and almost moving.” (Rooney, 2018, p. 135).

This quote suggests that Connell began to separate his personal relationship with Marianne from their social class. The new awareness that Marianne is the only person he can “ask something from” shows that he has moved from being a closed person to an individual who is able to acknowledge his emotional needs.

He realized that emotional intimacy is far more valuable than pride over money. The ability to be “demanding” in front of others is a sign that he has begun to recover from his sense of shame.

In line with Forster’s theory (1927), the ability to show vulnerability and acknowledge emotional needs confirms that Connell is a round character, who has psychological complexity and the capacity to develop.

Therefore, emotional vulnerability not only functions as a psychological condition, but also as a mechanism that drives character development through interpersonal relationship dynamics.

In revealing this vulnerability, Rooney uses indirect characterization techniques through the character’s thoughts. According to Hawthorn (2023), this technique gives readers direct access to understand inner processes that are not expressed in dialogue.

Connell’s vulnerability is shown through his painful reflection on the circulation of money that makes him feel inferior (Rooney, 2018, p. 122). Furthermore, the thought technique is also used to reveal his moment of emotional “realization” as an indicator of the development of his self-understanding in the context of interpersonal relationships (Rooney, 2018, p. 135).

Interpersonal Character Development

The development of Marianne and Connell cannot be understood as a separate internal process, but is strongly influenced by their interpersonal relationship. The analysis shows that their character complexity, reflected in self-perception, relational power and social position, and emotional vulnerability, is not formed independently. Instead, it is shaped through their interactions, especially their relationship with each other.

These interactions serve as a catalyst that continuously influences how they understand themselves, relate to others, and respond emotionally to different situations. This shows that interpersonal relationships do not only function as a background, but as an active mechanism in shaping character development.

In terms of self-perception, both characters experience significant changes because of mutual recognition and emotional connection. Marianne’s growing sense of self-worth and her ability to accept love are closely connected to Connell’s recognition and emotional support.

Connell becomes the first person who challenges Marianne's negative view of herself by treating her as someone worthy. This shows that Marianne's self-perception is not formed on her own, but is rebuilt through validation in a relationship. In this way, self-understanding is relational and develops through interaction with others.

Connell's treatment of Marianne also shows empathy in their relationship, where he understands and responds to her emotional condition, which helps build a supportive relationship and influences her self-concept (Achmad & Nurhadianti, 2023).

Meanwhile, Connell's self-awareness also develops through his interaction with Marianne, who provides a space where he can express himself without social pressure. However, this also shows a limitation, because Connell can only be his true self within this relationship. Outside of it, he is still influenced by social expectations.

This shows that his identity depends on context and is shaped through relationships. Therefore, interpersonal relationships not only support self-expression, but also reveal that identity can be fragmented.

Furthermore, changes in relational power and social position are also influenced by their interpersonal dynamics. Marianne's transformation from a socially isolated person into a more confident individual in a new environment shows her ability to reshape her identity. However, this change is not fully independent, because it happens alongside the changes in her relationship with Connell during school.

On the other hand, Connell's loss of social stability shows his dependence on external validation, which becomes clearer when he enters a new environment. This contrast shows that power and social position are not fixed, but can change depending on context and relationships. Their separation during school becomes an important turning point, showing that distance in a relationship can also affect personal development.

Emotional vulnerability becomes an important part of their interpersonal development. At first, Marianne tends to accept harmful treatment as part of her past experiences, which are also influenced by her relationship with Connell. This shows that vulnerability does not always come from a healthy understanding of relationships. Over time, she begins to develop a more balanced understanding of emotional dependence.

Meanwhile, Connell initially sees vulnerability as something that should be hidden, especially because of social pressure and shame. His inability to express his emotions creates distance in the relationship, showing that lack of openness can cause problems in interpersonal communication.

However, when Connell starts to express his emotional needs, it shows a change in how he builds relationships. His openness helps reduce emotional distance and shows that vulnerability can only appear in a safe relational space.

According to Devito (2011) (as cited in Achmad & Nurhadianti, 2023), openness allows better communication and helps reduce emotional distance.

This development shows that vulnerability is not only a personal condition, but is shaped and negotiated through relationships. Their relationship creates a space where vulnerability can be accepted, allowing both characters to develop deeper emotional awareness.

The development in their relationship also shows a shift toward a more equal relationship, where both individuals have space to express themselves. This equality is an important part of healthy interpersonal relationships (Achmad & Nurhadianti, 2023).

This study shows that the concept of round character from Forster (1927) is not only about internal change, but is also strongly influenced by relationships with others. Through self-understanding, social position, and emotional vulnerability, this study shows that character development happens through interaction, not individually.

Therefore, the interpersonal relationship between Marianne and Connell becomes the main factor that drives their development. Through continuous interaction, emotional exchange, and conflict, both characters experience changes that shape their identity, social position, and emotional depth.

This also shows that character development is relational, not purely individual. In addition, their development is not always linear, but involves tension, change, and dependence. This means that interpersonal relationships are not just part of the story, but play an important role in shaping character complexity.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that Sally Rooney successfully portrays the interpersonal character development of Marianne and Connell as round characters through dynamic transformations shaped by relational experiences. Both characters experience significant changes in self-perception, relational power and social position, and emotional vulnerability, which are closely influenced by their interactions with each other.

Marianne develops from a socially isolated individual with low self-worth into someone who gains social recognition and forms a healthier understanding of emotional dependence. Meanwhile, Connell evolves from a socially stable yet internally insecure individual into someone who becomes aware of his emotional needs and is able to express vulnerability. These developments confirm that both characters are not static, but personality complex and responsive to their social environments, aligning with Forster's concept of round characters.

Furthermore, Rooney predominantly employs indirect characterization techniques, such as narration, dialogue, and thought, to reveal the characters' development. These techniques allow readers to actively interpret the characters' internal processes and relational dynamics. In some cases, direct characterization

is also used to provide clear initial descriptions, especially in establishing Connell's early social identity. The combination of these techniques effectively presents the gradual and complex transformation of both characters.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis is limited to selected textual data, which may not fully represent all aspects of the characters' development. Second, the study focuses only on character and characterization with interpersonal aspects, without exploring other dimensions such as cultural or broader psychological contexts. Therefore, the findings should not be generalized beyond the scope of this analysis.

For further studies, it is recommended to explore character development using different theoretical approaches, such as psychoanalytic or sociocultural perspectives, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the characters. Future research may also examine other characters in the novel to compare different patterns of interpersonal development. In addition, analyzing the adaptation of the novel into other media, such as television, could offer insights into how characterization techniques are transformed across formats.

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