

Normal People



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SALLY ROONEY

Sally Rooney was born in 1991 in County Mayo, Ireland, where she grew up with her parents and two siblings. She eventually attended Trinity College in Dublin and was named a scholar in 2011, thus securing what's considered Ireland's most prestigious award for undergraduates. She was on the debate team during her time at Trinity and won the European University Debating Championships in 2013—an experience she wrote about in an essay called “Even If You Beat Me,” which captured the attention of her future agent, who later sold her debut novel, *Conversations with Friends*. After the novel's publication in 2017, Rooney started writing more about two characters from a short story she published in 2016. These explorations turned into *Normal People*, which was published in 2018 and adapted into a television series by Hulu and the BBC in 2020. Rooney published her third novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, in 2021. She has been hailed as the foremost “millennial novelist,” though some critics note that the hype surrounding Rooney's writing tends to prevent people from seeing the actual nuance and complexity of her work. Rooney herself has voiced misgivings about her own fame.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Because *Normal People* focuses so heavily on the intricacies and nuances of Connell and Marianne's romantic relationship, it doesn't necessarily dwell on many historical events. The novel does, however, mention the economic crisis that Ireland experienced in 2008, since Jamie—one of Marianne's college boyfriends—comes from a family involved in the banking scandals that impacted the economic downturn. Although there were some different factors at play in each country, the financial and social impact of Ireland's economic crisis was similar to the impact of the recession that took place in the United States during the same period. Both countries, for instance, saw bank bailouts that sparked massive protests. Of course, the specifics of Ireland's financial crisis don't necessarily work their way into *Normal People*, but the general awareness surrounding economic disparity that the crisis created ultimately serves as an appropriate backdrop for Connell's experience as a working-class student attending university alongside wealthy, privileged students.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Normal People has some similarities with Rooney's first novel, *Conversations with Friends*, at least insofar as both books

explore an on-off romantic relationship. For that matter, all three of Rooney's novels, including *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, consider what it means to have power, whether that power has to do with some kind of relational dynamic or with fame. Because Rooney became so famous at such a young age, her fame often eclipses her actual work, as reviewers and booksellers tend to use her books as a reference point for almost any kind of contemporary, realist fiction that explores present-day life. In reality, though, *Normal People* has a lot in common with 19th-century novels of manners, which were books that dissect and explore the conventions of a given society, examining the relationships and everyday lives of people living in certain social environments. In *Normal People*, Connell even becomes infatuated with Jane Austen's *Emma*, a novel of manners (or, perhaps more accurately, a *comedy of manners*) that focuses on the relationships between people living in a small fictional town in England. In terms of a more contemporary comparison, though, there's an argument to be made that *Normal People* shares some similarities with André Aciman's *Call Me By Your Name*, since both books feature complex romantic relationships and illustrate just how hard it can be to communicate clearly when experiencing a burning sense of passion.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Normal People
- **When Written:** 2016 and 2017
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Contemporary Fiction, Realism
- **Setting:** Ireland in 2011-2015
- **Climax:** Due to the episodic nature of *Normal People* and the way it tracks the cycles of passion and miscommunication inherent to Marianne and Connell's relationship, there is no single, definitive climax in the novel.
- **Antagonist:** Miscommunication

EXTRA CREDIT

Connell's Chain. At one point in *Normal People* there's a passing reference to a small silver chain that Connell wears as a necklace. Sally Rooney and her television co-writer, Alice Birch, preserved this detail in their television adaptation of *Normal People*, which was so popular that it spawned many online fan accounts—including an Instagram account full of screenshots of Paul Mescal (the actor who plays Connell) wearing a silver chain.

First Draft. Connell and Marianne both appeared for the first time in print in a story that Sally Rooney published in a 2016 issue of the literary journal *The White Review*. As characters, they speak and behave much differently than they do in *Normal People*, but the seeds of their complex relationship are certainly there.



PLOT SUMMARY

Connell's mother works for Marianne's family as a house cleaner in the fictional Irish town of Carricklea. He often interacts with Marianne when he picks up his mother, but he avoids talking to her at school, since everyone dislikes her there—everyone, that is, except Connell, but he's too embarrassed to let his fondness for her show. Still, he enjoys talking to her about literature and life in general. They're both at the top of their class, and although everyone thinks Marianne is "weird," Connell connects with her in a way he can't connect with anyone else. Eventually, Marianne admits that she likes him as more than a friend, prompting him to say that he's confused about his feelings: he likes her, but he thinks it'd be awkward if people found out. After agreeing to keep their relationship a secret, they kiss.

Both Connell and Marianne will be going to college next year. Connell was originally planning to go to school near home, but Marianne convinces him to broaden his horizons by applying to Trinity College in Dublin, which is where she'll be going, too. As they prepare for their final exams, they spend a lot of time together having sex and forming a close bond. But Connell still doesn't want anyone to know. He even asks a girl named Rachel to the "Debs" dance at the end of the year, thinking it's not a big deal because he doesn't have feelings for her. Marianne, however, is deeply hurt. In the weeks leading up to the end of term, Marianne stops going to school and refuses to answer Connell's texts. Her absence in his life throws him into a mild depressive state that is only made worse when his friend Eric tells him that everyone knew there was something going on between him and Marianne—nobody, he realizes, would have cared if they'd dated.

Connell and Marianne don't see each other again until they run into each other at a party in Dublin. They're both attending Trinity, but their lives are much different. Connell has had a hard time finding friends, feeling out place among students from wealthier backgrounds. But Marianne is quite popular. When they see each other at the party, they get along very well—the ugliness from their past doesn't go unacknowledged, but it also doesn't keep them from being friendly and even flirting. Marianne has a boyfriend, but she and Connell still connect at the party, with Connell explaining that, although he ended up dating Rachel after the dance, he never really felt they were a good match. Marianne jokes that she could have told Connell that from the start, and he admits that he could

have used her help. But she wasn't answering his texts at that point.

Over the course of Marianne and Connell's first year in college, they rekindle their close relationship. Marianne introduces Connell to her many friends. He still doesn't feel like he fits in at Trinity, but things get better—he likes Niall, his roommate, and he often socializes with Marianne and her friends in the evenings. Although they both date other people at various points throughout the year, they never lose touch. By April, they're more or less together, though their romantic relationship isn't public until Peggy, one of Marianne's friends, bluntly asks if they're sleeping together. They say that they are, but they don't define themselves as a "couple."

At the end of their first school year, the restaurant Connell works for goes out of business. He won't be able to pay his rent, so he tells Niall that he'll have to move out. But he doesn't want to go back to Carricklea. He sleeps at Marianne's apartment most nights anyway, so he figures it won't be a big deal to stay with her for the summer. She never cares about money, anyway. But he has trouble working up the nerve to tell her about his predicament. He puts the conversation off for as long as possible. Then, when he finally tells her that he has to move out of his apartment, she immediately says that she assumes he'll be going back to Carricklea. Taken by surprise, he hears himself saying that she's right: he's going home. Dismayed at how the conversation has gone, he feels like it's too late to clarify what he originally meant. Worse, he voices his assumption that Marianne will want to see other people. She takes his question to mean that *he* wants to see others, so she says she's all right with that, too.

They don't talk for most of the summer, but then they run into each other in the supermarket in Carricklea. Marianne has come home to attend an anniversary Mass for her father, who died a long time ago. Connell gives Marianne a ride home from the supermarket and learns about the Mass, which is scheduled for the following day. He tells her he'll be there. They also talk about Marianne's new boyfriend, Jamie, but their conversation remains cordial. Connell goes to the Mass the next day and seeks out Marianne's eyes, making her feel supported and at ease. In the fall, they meet up for coffee and talk some more about Jamie, as Marianne explains that Jamie likes to beat her up during sex. Connell is disturbed to hear Marianne talk about Jamie hurting her, but she tells him that it was her idea in the first place. Connell doesn't know it, but Marianne is used to experiencing violence from loved ones, since her brother, Alan, often becomes physically aggressive toward her (he also verbally abuses her).

By January of their second year in college, Marianne is still with Jamie, and Connell is dating a young woman named Helen. But they still have a very close relationship—so close, in fact, that Marianne cries when Connell first tells her about Helen. By the summer, though, they're on good terms again. Both Marianne

and Connell received prestigious scholarships that cover their full tuition, room, and boarding at Trinity. Nothing about the scholarship has changed Marianne's daily life, but it has greatly impacted Connell, who, for the first time in his life, doesn't have to worry about money. Accordingly, he spends the summer traveling Europe with friends, eventually ending at Marianne's family vacation home in Trieste, Italy. Marianne has been staying there with Peggy and Jamie, and it's obvious when Connell and his friends arrive that things are tense between her and Jamie. At dinner that night, Jamie criticizes Marianne and acts like she's stupid. They go inside to argue, and then everyone hears a shriek. Connell goes to make sure everything is all right and watches Jamie purposefully drop a champagne glass that he knows used to belong to Marianne's father, prompting Marianne to lunge at him. Connell separates them and brings Marianne outside, where they hold each other without saying much.

That night, Marianne sleeps in Connell's bed. She tells him that her family doesn't love her, revealing that Alan abuses her. Connell is so overwhelmed with emotion that he starts crying. He kisses Marianne and moves toward her, but she says they should stop. He apologizes, but she just goes to sleep.

The following academic year, Marianne studies abroad in Sweden. She broke up with Jamie after the trip to Italy. He didn't take it well and has turned their friend group against her. But Marianne is far away from all that in Sweden, seeing a photographer named Lukas who likes to take provocative pictures of her. He also likes to play a "game" during sex—a game in which he says bad things about Marianne while she remains silent. One afternoon, she goes to his studio for a photoshoot, and he ties her up. But then he says that he loves her, and she writhes against the knots, shouting at him to untie her. He does, and then she tells him never to say anything like that again, wondering how he could actually believe that he loves her while treating her so terribly.

While Marianne is away for the year, Connell learns that Rob, a friend from home, killed himself. The news of Rob's death throws Connell into a deep depression. He has always felt some anxiety, but now it feels unmanageable. He lies on the floor for hours one night, fantasizing about what it would be like to just stay there and die of dehydration. Worried about his bleak state, Niall suggests that Connell go to the school's mental health services. He does, but his conversation with the counselor doesn't help much. One problem is that Connell doesn't have many people to talk to. He broke up with Helen after she accompanied him to Rob's funeral. What's more, he still doesn't feel like he fits in at Trinity, and Marianne—the only person who really understands him—is away. Around this time, though, he starts writing short stories and hanging out with Sadie, who edits the campus literary journal. Despite his sadness, he has brief moments of pleasure while writing. That summer, both Connell and Marianne live at home in

Carriclea. They see each other a lot, and Marianne is instrumental in helping Connell work through his depression. One evening, they're lounging in Connell's bedroom watching a soccer game when they start talking about the romantic side of their relationship. They were dancing at a bar the night before but ended up parting ways for the night, even though they both wanted to be with each other. As they rehash the evening, they talk about how hard it is sometimes to know what the other wants, and Connell admits that sometimes he thinks it'd be easier if there weren't romantic overtones to their friendship. Even as they talk this way, though, they start becoming physically intimate. Soon enough, they're having sex for the first time in a long while. Everything about it feels right, but then Marianne asks Connell to hit her. Her request brings their lovemaking to an abrupt halt, as he says that he couldn't do that, thinking it would be "weird." His comment offends Marianne, who quickly gets dressed and walks back to her house before he can convince her to stay. When she gets home, Alan becomes abusive toward her, eventually opening a door in her face and causing her to bleed profusely. She calls Connell, who immediately comes over and tells her to get in the car, and then he walks up to Alan and threatens to kill him if he ever hurts Marianne again.

That winter, Marianne and Connell spend most of their time together. Connell even shows his love by kissing her in public or telling her he loves her. But he *doesn't* tell her that Sadie encouraged him to apply to a graduate Creative Writing program in New York. One day in February, he's surprised to learn that he actually got in. Marianne is hurt that he didn't tell her, but she also insists that he go. He tells her there's no way he could ever leave her behind and go to New York on his own, prompting her to reflect on the fact that he would never have come to Dublin if not for her. She has helped him find a good life. And he, in turn, has made her feel loved and less lonely. Knowing things will never be the same if he leaves, she tells him again to go to New York—she'll always be here, she says.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Marianne – One of the novel's two protagonists, Marianne is from the fictional town of Carriclea in Ireland. Extremely intelligent, Marianne is unpopular in secondary school. Everyone thinks she's "weird"—some people even call her "ugly." She doesn't have a good relationship with her family, either, as her father used to hit her before he died, and her brother, Alan, still abuses her. Feeling alone in the world, Marianne is shocked to learn that Connell—who comes over sometimes because his mother works as her family's housecleaner—is interested in her. They form a close bond, connecting over shared academic interests and enjoying each other's views on life, though Connell insists on keeping their relationship a secret. For

Marianne, Carricklea is just a waystation, somewhere she's eager to leave behind. It's perhaps because she thinks this way that she encourages Connell to broaden his horizons by applying to Trinity College in Dublin, which is where she'll be going. By the time they both get into Trinity, though, Marianne is no longer speaking to Connell because he asked a popular girl to the end-of-year dance instead of her. Once she gets to college, however, everything about Marianne's life changes. She's popular and well-liked and finally feels like she fits in, so it's easy to forget about what happened in secondary school. Throughout college, she and Connell have an on-off relationship that is complicated by their frequent miscommunication and lack of emotional transparency. One stumbling block is also Marianne's suspicion that she doesn't deserve to be loved. She enjoys the idea of fully submitting to Connell, as if to show him that she'd do anything for him, but this tends to frighten him. By the end of college, though, Marianne seems to have more confidence in her bond with Connell, knowing that he fully loves her. She also recognizes that their relationship—though often difficult—has brought both of them good things in life, which is why she accepts the idea of letting Connell go.

Connell – Connell is one of the two protagonists of *Normal People*. Reserved and shy, he's from the fictional Irish town of Carricklea, where he's one of the most popular boys in school. Everyone admires him, but he doesn't feel like he can be himself with anyone—except for Marianne, whose house his mother, Lorraine, cleans. Everyone in school dislikes Marianne, so Connell doesn't interact with her in public. But he looks forward to the conversations they have when he picks up Lorraine from work, enjoying talking about things he feels he can't discuss with others. His relationship with Marianne eventually becomes romantic, but he insists on keeping it a secret, thinking that his life—and, indeed, his connection with Marianne—would be ruined if his friends found out about them. Because of his anxiety surrounding their relationship, Connell asks a girl named Rachel to the end-of-year dance instead of Marianne, putting a temporary end to their relationship, as Marianne stops going to school and stops talking to him. Because she urged him to push himself by applying to Trinity College in Dublin, though, they end up reuniting in college, but everything is different. Marianne is popular, whereas Connell is lonely and feels out of place. Everyone around him seems to come from a wealthy background, whereas he constantly worries about money. His peers have strong opinions about everything, and though he's intellectually on par with them, he feels inferior. Thankfully, Marianne takes him under her wing and introduces him to her friends, making his transition to college much easier. Throughout the next few years, he and Marianne maintain a close, emotionally intense relationship even when they're dating other people. By the end of college, Connell is more comfortable being open with Marianne, but he applies to a Creative Writing graduate program in New York

without telling her. Astounded to have actually gotten in, he doesn't want to leave Marianne, having trouble imagining his life without her, but she urges him to follow his passion.

Lorraine (Connell's Mother) – Lorraine is Connell's mother. A kind and caring person, she has a casual but close relationship with her son. Part of their closeness might have to do with the fact that she's quite young—she had Connell when she was just 17 and didn't involve his father in their life. She works as a housecleaner for Marianne's family and is very fond of Marianne herself, so she's happy when she discovers that Connell and Marianne are together. However, Connell makes it clear that they're not *officially* together, which concerns Lorraine because she doesn't want her son to “use” Marianne for sex. Similarly, she's incensed when he tells her that he asked someone else to the end-of-year dance instead of Marianne—so incensed that she forces him to pull the car over in the pouring rain and decides to walk home because she doesn't want to say something to him that she might regret. Throughout the rest of Connell and Marianne's tumultuous relationship, Lorraine supports Connell emotionally while gently urging him to be forthright about his feelings for Marianne.

Eric – Eric is one of Connell's friends in secondary school. Popular and confident, Eric bullies Marianne, making jokes about her with Rob and Rachel. Years later, he regrets the way he treated her and tries to make up for it by showing her kindness whenever their paths cross. He even slightly reveals this kinder side of himself in secondary school when he tells Connell at the end-of-year dance that everyone knew there was something going on between him and Marianne, implying that nobody would have cared if their relationship had been public. When Eric sees Marianne one night at a bar after Rob's suicide, he drunkenly apologizes for how he treated her and suggests that Rob would have wanted to do the same.

Rob – Rob is one of Connell's friends in secondary school. Like Eric and Rachel, Rob bullies Marianne in front of Connell, but Connell doesn't stand up for her. Later, when Connell is away at Trinity in Dublin, Rob takes his own life. The last Connell had heard from him was when Rob sent him a Facebook message about a picture in which Connell was with a young woman—Rob jokingly asked if Connell was “riding” her, but Connell never responded. In the aftermath of his friend's death, Connell feels guilty for not being there for Rob when he was going through a hard time, and he plunges into a deep depression.

Rachel – Rachel is the most popular girl at Connell and Marianne's secondary school. Everybody knows she has a crush on Connell, but Connell is uninterested in her in a romantic way. She's especially mean to Marianne, which makes it that much worse that Connell decides to ask her to the end-of-year dance instead of Marianne—a decision that temporarily ends his and Marianne's secret relationship.

Alan (Marianne's Brother) – Alan is Marianne's older brother, who still lives at home with their mother. He's verbally and physically abusive to Marianne, often looking for ways to get into arguments with her. Not all of these arguments end in violence, but he always manages to at least say something hurtful about her. When she's living at home for the summer in one of her final years of college, he chases her into her room and then opens the door so hard that it slams into her face and possibly breaks her nose. After she calls Connell for help, he comes and tells Marianne to get in the car, and then he threatens to kill Alan if he ever hurts Marianne again. Crying in fear, Alan tells Connell that he understands—he won't touch her again.

Denise (Marianne's Mother) – Denise is Marianne's mother. A widow, she's rich and successful but emotionally removed from her role as a mother. She's rarely home, and when she is, she tends to unfairly criticize Marianne. She also purposefully overlooks Alan's abusive behavior toward Marianne and even treats Marianne in some abusive, manipulative ways herself.

Joanna – Joanna is one of the friends Marianne makes at college in Dublin. Unlike her other close friend, Peggy, Joanna takes Marianne's side when she and Jamie break up, eventually revealing that she never really liked Peggy and Jamie in the first place. Joanna remains a supportive person in Marianne's life, trying to help her make sense of her confusing relationship with Connell and, in a broader sense, generally staying by her side.

Peggy – Peggy is one of Marianne's friends at Trinity College in Dublin. She's opinionated and judgmental, but Marianne spends a lot of time with her throughout her first years in college, especially since Peggy considers herself Marianne's best friend. Eventually, though, Peggy takes Jamie's side when Marianne breaks up with him, and though it upsets Marianne to lose Peggy as a friend, both Joanna and Connell hint that they never liked her anyway.

Jamie – Jamie is a wealthy, entitled student at Trinity College, one of the boyfriends Marianne dates when she's not with Connell. Even though he's not all that intelligent, Jamie acts very condescendingly toward most people. He certainly doesn't like Connell, who intimidates him both because of his physical stature and because of his history with Marianne. Connell, in turn, dislikes Jamie, especially when he finds out that Jamie likes to "beat up" Marianne during sex. Marianne isn't even sure she likes this kind of sexual behavior, though she was the one who suggested they try it in the first place—largely, she suspects, because she knows she doesn't respect Jamie and feels guilty about that, so she wants to prove her willingness to sacrifice her own desires in order to prioritize his. While on vacation in Italy, Marianne and Jamie have a fight that leads to their breakup, and in the ensuing months, Jamie spreads nasty rumors about her and turns most of their friend group against her.

Lukas – Lukas is a photographer Marianne dates while studying abroad in Sweden. He isn't very attentive to who Marianne is as a person. Instead, he's more interested in taking provocative pictures of her and playing what he calls a "game" that involves him tying her up and degrading her while she remains silent. Marianne's relationship with Lukas depresses her, and she ends it very abruptly when he says that he loves her—a ridiculous thing to say, she thinks, considering how poorly he treats her.

Niall – Niall is Connell's college roommate. Connell likes Niall quite a bit and rooms with him for more than just his first year. Unlike many of the people around Connell, Niall isn't stuck-up or entitled but rather down to earth and kind. When Connell goes through a severe depressive state, Niall worries about him and suggests that he seek help through the college's mental health services.

Miss Neary – Miss Neary is the economics teacher at Connell and Marianne's secondary school. Everyone in school jokes about how Connell wants to have sex with Miss Neary, but this joke upsets him. It's true, though, that Miss Neary seems to flirt with him—even Marianne notices and tells Connell that she wouldn't mind making an anonymous report on his behalf, but he tells her not to. When he comes back to Carricklea during college, he gets extremely drunk one night and encounters Miss Neary at a bar. She takes him home and tries to have sex with him despite his protests. He manages to avoid sleeping with her, but he still feels deeply uncomfortable about the entire experience. When he tells Marianne about it, she vows to kill Miss Neary if she ever does something like that to Connell again.

Helen – Helen is one of Connell's girlfriends at Trinity College. Connell feels strongly about her, thinking that she brings out the best in him. He even compares her to Marianne and decides that, although what he and Marianne have is passionate, he's better off with Helen. But their relationship doesn't last. After Helen accompanies Connell to Rob's funeral, she brings up the fact that Connell couldn't stop staring at Marianne at the service. Connell, however, refuses to apologize, ultimately leading to their breakup.

Sadie – Sadie is a student at Trinity College. She helps run the school's literary journal and encourages Connell's writing, even convincing him at one point to let her publish one of his stories. She also urges him to apply to a graduate program in Creative Writing in New York. Connell doesn't think he has a chance, so he applies and is later astounded when he gets into the program.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Karen – Karen goes to Connell and Marianne's secondary school. She's friends with the popular kids like Connell, Rachel, Eric, and Rob. Unlike most of her friends, though, she's kind to Marianne.

Gareth – Gareth is a confident, well-liked student at Trinity and Marianne’s first college boyfriend. Connell knows him too but is surprised to learn that he’s dating Marianne, though their relationship doesn’t last long.

Elaine – Elaine is one of Connell’s friends at Trinity College. She accompanies him and Niall on their trip around Europe the summer after Connell receives a large scholarship.

Teresa – Teresa is a young woman Connell briefly dates in his first year at Trinity College.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



LOVE, INEXPERIENCE, AND EMOTIONAL INTENSITY

Normal People is a novel about first love and the experience of opening up romantically to another person. Although there are factors working against them from the very beginning of their relationship, Connell and Marianne never seem to fully move on from their close bond. They start seeing each other in secondary school, but Connell insists on keeping the relationship a secret because Marianne is widely disliked. His unwillingness to publicly acknowledge his feelings for her is selfish and unfair, but it also comes from a place of insecurity. Despite his popularity, he’s very self-conscious and has trouble showing people who he really is—except, that is, for Marianne, who helps him feel good about himself. Similarly, Connell is kind to Marianne (in private) and shows interest in her as a person, and this gives her a sense of acceptance that her life otherwise lacks. Their entire relationship is therefore founded on an intimate form of emotional support, as each of them allows the other to be vulnerable and open about who they are. As a result, there’s a comforting quality to their relationship, which is why their romantic connection lasts all the way through college and even persists when they’re dating other people. But the enduring quality of their emotional attachment doesn’t necessarily mean their relationship is thriving or even all that healthy—it just means they’ve formed an intimacy that’s hard to let go of, ultimately illustrating how powerful it can be for people to make themselves vulnerable to someone else for the first time.

There’s an intensity to Marianne and Connell’s relationship, perhaps because the depth and strength of their connection is unlike anything they’ve experienced before in their lives. They are, after all, fairly young when they first get together, so the emotionally dense nature of their relationship feels especially

all-consuming. Marianne is particularly inexperienced when it comes to romance, since she has never dated anyone. Worse, she doesn’t even have any friends, so there’s nobody in her life she can relate to. Connell, on the other hand, has had several girlfriends, but none of his relationships have been serious. And though he’s popular in school, he doesn’t feel like any of his friends see him for who he really is, since they’re all solely interested in things like sports, sex, and gossip, whereas he’s a more sensitive and contemplative soul. He and Marianne, however, genuinely relate to each other on an emotional level and share an interest in things like literature. As they discover just how compatible they are, they forge a connection that runs much deeper than the average secondary-school relationship, largely because they provide each other with a sense of acceptance and belonging.

By opening up to each other so intensely, though, Marianne and Connell sometimes wade into emotional territory they’re not ready for. Sometimes they even seem *surprised* by their own emotional intimacy, as if they’re not used to letting people into their private lives. When, for instance, Marianne admits that her father used to hit her, Connell suddenly says that he loves her. It’s an impulsive response, and though he means it in the moment, he later wonders if it’s true. He has almost said that he loves Marianne before, but this is the first time he’s ever “given in and said it”—implying that he does, indeed, love her but has been actively keeping himself from articulating the feeling. And yet, the mere fact that he later wonders if what he said is true suggests that these moments of intense connection have an overwhelming power, making it hard for him to hold back his feelings like he normally does.

In many ways, the emotional intensity and vulnerability at the heart of Marianne and Connell’s relationship is what makes it so hard for them to move on from each other, even after years of heartbreak and frustration. Because of their history together, they learn to depend on each other as they move into adulthood. By the time they’re in college, Connell starts to worry about the implications of their intense connection, especially when he has the unsettling realization that Marianne would willingly let him hurt her just because she loves him so much. His troubling thought in this moment suggests that he knows on a certain level that there’s an unhealthy—and possibly even destructive—quality to their bond. In contrast, when he starts dating a young woman named Helen, he’s astounded by how easy and rewarding their connection feels. Their communication is open and honest, he’s happy when they’re together, and their relationship makes him feel like a “heavy lid has been lifted off his emotional life.” And yet, he doesn’t stay with Helen. Instead, he goes back to his confusing and emotionally taxing relationship with Marianne. *Normal People* thus calls attention to how hard it can be to turn away from formative relationships, even when it’s clear that doing so might be for the best.



IDENTITY, INSECURITY, AND SOCIAL STATUS



MISCOMMUNICATION AND ASSUMPTIONS

In *Normal People*, Marianne and Connell's separate insecurities impact

and complicate their relationship. Connell, for his part, often worries about fitting in, whether that means protecting his popularity in secondary school or feeling out of place among rich intellectuals at Trinity College in Dublin. Marianne, on the other hand, doesn't care quite as much about fitting in socially, but she *does* worry about whether or not she's deserving of kindness and love. Her insecurity in this regard stems from her abusive upbringing, since both her brother and her mother treat her terribly when they think she's acting superior or "special." Both Marianne's and Connell's insecurities end up putting pressure on their relationship, since they're each constantly working through their own anxieties and, in turn, looking to each other for some kind of affirmation. To that end, they depend on each other to ease their worries—Marianne looks to Connell as a way of confirming that she's worthy of love, whereas Connell looks to Marianne for a sense of companionship that makes him feel understood and less alone. This kind of mutual support is all well and good up to a certain point, but it gets tricky because their relationship is constantly shifting. Because they each stake their sense of self on their tumultuous relationship, then, they often plunge into bouts of low self-esteem and insecurity when they're not on good terms, hinting at the downsides of depending on others for confidence and reassurance.

Connell's social anxiety often dictates how he leads his personal life, as he interferes with his own happiness by worrying about how other people perceive him. His relationship with Marianne suffers as a result of his insecurity, especially when he prioritizes his reputation in secondary school over his feelings for her. Even though their relationship brings him happiness, he refuses to publicly acknowledge their connection, saying that things might be "awkward" if people knew they were dating. Of course, his excuse that dating publicly would be "awkward" is mainly a weak attempt to avoid saying what he really means, which is that he doesn't want to face the embarrassment of dating the least popular girl in school. At the same time, though, his use of the word "awkward" actually sheds light on his fear of social discomfort: the idea of being singled out as different or odd terrifies him. Therefore, he's willing to put his relationship with Marianne in jeopardy, sacrificing his own happiness in order to hold onto his identity as a popular, "normal" boy in school—the kind of person who would never have feelings for somebody who's considered a social outcast.

Despite his obsession with social status, though, Connell eventually finds out that nobody would have even cared if he and Marianne had dated publicly. As a result, he sees that trying to conceal their relationship was pointless and created unnecessary pain. He also sees that popularity is a petty thing to get hung up on, and though he gets a second chance with Marianne in college, the fact that he let his insecurity about social status overshadow their deep emotional connection ultimately haunts the rest of the relationship.

To that end, one of the reasons that Connell's selfish behavior in secondary school haunts the relationship is that it seemingly validates Marianne's fear that she's "unworthy" of love. Like Connell, she worries about the kind of person she is, but her insecurity mostly has to do with the way she sees *herself*, not necessarily with how others view her. Because her cold and abusive family members never show her affection or care, she secretly thinks she's an unlovable person. As such, it's a big deal when Connell says that he loves her, since it challenges her personal narrative that she's undeserving of such affection. The attentiveness he shows her is rare in her life, which makes it all the more painful when he goes to such great lengths to hide his love—a gesture that subtly *confirms* her suspicion that nobody in their right mind would love her in the first place.

Because Marianne and Connell both need each other to affirm different aspects of their identities, by the time they reach college, their relationship has become extremely layered, complex, and hard to navigate. Connell, for one, feels out of place in Dublin, feeling as if his personality is "something external to himself, managed by the opinions of others." In other words, he feels a lack of control over his own identity, or at least how other people view his identity. His relationship with Marianne thus becomes a safe haven of sorts, since he has always felt—even in Carricklea—that he can be himself around her. Marianne, on the other hand, is popular and well-liked in college, but she still looks to Connell for proof that she's worthy of love, perhaps because he was the first person to challenge the idea that she's "unworthy" of kindness and affection. The problem, though, is that relying on each other to constantly reaffirm the things they fear most about themselves is unsustainable—after all, they have a sporadic relationship that is emotionally volatile and undependable. When they're not on good terms, then, they're essentially defenseless against their own insecurities.

Although *Normal People* outlines the impact of Marianne and Connell's insecurities on their relationship, the novel doesn't make any kind of sweeping argument against letting such concerns get wrapped up in romance. If anything, the book illustrates how hard it is to *avoid* turning to loved ones when trying to navigate insecurity. Connell and Marianne might be happier if they were more self-assured about who they are, but the novel suggests that it's only natural for people to turn to each other for affirmation and support—even if doing so is

often messy and emotionally fraught.

Marianne and Connell's relationship in *Normal People* is largely defined by a lack of open and effective communication. Because the novel's structure often alternates between how, exactly, each of them thinks about the same thing, it's clear to readers that Marianne and Connell are often on the same page, even when they don't know it. In fact, it's quite obvious throughout the novel that they love each other, but they spend the majority of their time acting like they're just friends with a complex history, ultimately avoiding any kind of direct articulation of their true emotions. To that end, even when they do talk about their romantic feelings, their conversations are usually complicated and abstract, as they try to feel each other out and then adjust their own behavior according to those assumptions. For instance, when Connell tells Marianne he'll have to move out of his apartment for the summer, he intends to ask if he can live with her. Because she assumes he'd never ask such a thing, though, she jumps in and says, "You'll be going home, then." Connell takes Marianne's comment to mean that she doesn't want him to stay, so he says she's right: he's going home. Worse, he suggests that she'll probably want to see other people, and because she assumes this is really what *he* wants, she says yes. If either of them simply said what they truly felt, they would avoid terrible heartache. Instead, though, they jump to conclusions and speak indirectly to each other, illustrating how hard it is to have a functioning relationship without establishing strong channels of communication and a sense of emotional transparency.

Most of the problems Connell and Marianne experience in their relationship stem from an overall lack of clarity that forces them to guess how the other person feels. Even at the end of college, after years of loving each other and trying to make things work, they still have trouble making their emotions clear. For instance, they go dancing one night and, even though they both want to kiss each other, they end up spending the night apart and speaking tensely about it the following day. Marianne says she thought Connell left her on the dancefloor because she'd done something to annoy him; she thought he went outside to smoke because he wanted to flirt with someone else. But Connell claims to have asked her to come with him to smoke, saying that he, too, wanted to kiss her. The confusion is the result of simple miscommunication, but the tension that arises from that miscommunication is deeper and more complicated, as Connell uses this opportunity to voice a broader concern: namely, that things would be easier between them if there wasn't a romantic element to their relationship. The obvious implication here is that he wants to put a decisive end to the romantic side of their bond—and yet, he never fully says that this is what he wants. In fact, when Marianne gets upset and starts to leave, he says he thinks it's "pretty obvious" that he wants her to stay. "I don't find it obvious what you want," Marianne replies, highlighting just how hard it is to read his

emotions. They then end up having sex, making it that much harder to discern where their relationship stands.

Of course, the reason it's so difficult for Marianne and Connell to sense what the other person wants is that neither of them seem to have clarity about their own desires. Instead of levelheadedly deciding what they would want for themselves in an ideal situation, they try to take cues from each other. It's therefore difficult for them to define the nature of their relationship. In a period during which they're romantically involved but haven't actually talked about their feelings, Peggy asks if they're sleeping together. It's the first time anyone at college has asked, and they're both delighted to admit that they are, indeed, sleeping together. But their delight only lasts for a moment, since Peggy then calls them a "couple," prompting Marianne to point out that they haven't defined themselves as such. Peggy thinks Marianne means they're in an open relationship, and because they haven't technically discussed the matter, they go along with this idea, each of them clearly trying to figure out if an open relationship is what the other one wants (it isn't). In a way, then, emotional guesswork is a defining element of their relationship, as they hold back from declaring their feelings until they get a sense of what the other person thinks.

Interestingly enough, Marianne and Connell are capable of speaking frankly about their emotions, but only in retrospect. They often rehash past miscommunications, finally admitting what they would have liked to say or do at the time, but they never speak openly in the moment. For example, although Connell fails to ask Marianne if he can live with her for the summer, he later clarifies that he had originally wanted to move in. But he makes this clarification long after the damage has already been done to their relationship. His retrospective honesty just upsets Marianne all over again, since they obviously can't go back in time and fix the situation. Analyzing their miscommunications in hindsight doesn't help them, instead opening old wounds and making it that much harder for them to know how to proceed. After all, practicing emotional transparency in the present is much harder than doing it in retrospect, since it requires people to expose their feelings without knowing what will happen. By not communicating effectively in real-time, then, Connell and Marianne remain guarded with each other, thus illustrating that miscommunication often creates difficult emotional barriers between people.



MONEY, CLASS, AND ENTITLEMENT

Normal People highlights the relational tensions that often arise as a result of class disparity.

Connell comes from a working-class background and is very conscious of his modest upbringing, especially since his mother works as a housecleaner for Marianne's family, who are very wealthy. Marianne and Connell tend to avoid the

subject of money when possible, and though Connell doesn't necessarily hold Marianne's wealth against her, he can't help but notice the many ways in which she takes her own privilege for granted. The difference in their economic backgrounds becomes especially pronounced when they go to college at Trinity in Dublin, where Connell has a hard time fitting in because so many of the students are wealthy. Marianne, on the other hand, finds it easy to make friends. She also does a number of things that underscore her lack of awareness surrounding her own privilege, like apply for a **scholarship** simply to demonstrate her intellectual abilities. Whereas Connell (who receives the same scholarship as Marianne) feels as if his entire life changes once he receives the money, nothing about Marianne's daily life shifts at all. Connell notices Marianne's entitlement and the different way she approaches money, but what's notable about this unequal element of their relationship isn't necessarily that it pushes them apart, but that it doesn't. It's true that Connell and Marianne are from different economic backgrounds, but the novel doesn't suggest that this class disparity creates an insurmountable problem in their relationship—rather, *Normal People* simply acknowledges the subtle ways in which things like money and class can gently weigh on relationships.

Even though Connell's not hostile about the fact that Marianne is wealthy, it's undeniable that the difference in their backgrounds creates a certain imbalance in their relationship. This imbalance is perhaps most glaring when they first get to know each other, since Connell has to pick his mother up from cleaning Marianne's house. Consequently, the first formative conversations of their relationship take place in Marianne's mansion, making it hard for Connell to overlook not just the difference in their lifestyles, but also the fact that his mother works for her family. Even other people recognize the class disparity between Connell and Marianne, as Rob teases Connell by suggesting that Marianne must see him as her "butler." For the most part, Connell shrugs off such thoughts, but he does get upset when his mother suggests at one point that Marianne's mother might not like the idea of him dating her—he has never fully thought about the possibility that Marianne's family might look down on him, and he's surprised to find that it makes him "furious." The implication, then, is that he has no problem with the class disparity between him and Marianne but *does* have a problem with the notion that her mother might feel "superior." His concern therefore has little to do with money and everything to do with dignity and respect.

It is perhaps because Connell cares more about respect than money that he's able to ignore Marianne's occasional entitled comments and behavior—after all, he knows that she respects him. Her admiration for him is obvious, as she goes around college telling people nice things about him, like that he's the smartest person she's ever met. In fact, he gets a special thrill out of hearing her say this to rich students whose parents are

successful, influential figures in society. That he derives pleasure from outsmarting students with more financial privilege than him suggests that he *does* have some animosity toward the rich, at least on a certain level. This animosity might have to do with the trouble he has fitting in at Trinity, since he feels like everyone around him lives in a different world—a world in which opportunity and possibility appear out of nowhere. That's also the world Marianne is used to, and though she doesn't necessarily flaunt her wealth, Connell is very aware of how unconcerned she is about money. Unlike him, she doesn't have to work her way through college, nor does she have to pay for her own housing. When they both receive prestigious scholarships that pay for school, lodging, and meals, Connell knows that Marianne only took the scholarship exams to distinguish herself as intelligent, focusing on prestige without considering that the scholarship could have gone to someone who actually needed assistance—someone just like Connell.

Despite passing moments of tension surrounding Marianne's privilege, though, *Normal People* isn't a novel about how class disparity ruins relationships. Instead, the book merely uses Connell and Marianne's contrasting economic backgrounds to illustrate a simple idea: namely, that some people can afford to never think about money while others cannot. And while this distinction doesn't always wreak havoc on romantic connections, it's hard to keep it from bringing itself to bear on a relationship in at least some ways.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



NUDE PHOTOS

Several times throughout *Normal People*, Connell and Marianne talk about nude photos, which come to symbolize the fraught power dynamics that can sometimes crop up in romantic relationships. When Connell and Marianne are unofficially dating during their first year of college, Connell asks if Marianne would ever consider sending him naked pictures of herself. Before she can answer, he adds that he would delete them, which confuses her: why would he want to delete them? He explains that there's a certain etiquette surrounding the use of nude photos, saying that it's a common courtesy for the recipient to delete them to protect the other person's privacy. He's referring to the unfortunate fact that some people use nude photos in ways that violate the subject's privacy, like when Rob showed Connell and Eric naked pictures of his date at the Debs dance. Similarly, in the aftermath of Marianne and Jamie's breakup, a rumor goes around that there are naked pictures of Marianne on the internet. It's unclear if

Jamie circulated these pictures or if he just spread the rumor to humiliate Marianne. Either way, though, he uses the general idea to exact revenge on Marianne for breaking up with him. In this way, nude photos take on extra significance in the novel, representing how difficult and even frightening it can be to trust and make oneself vulnerable to a romantic partner. And by that same token, Connell's promise to delete Marianne's naked pictures symbolizes his discomfort with the idea of having any kind of power over her in their relationship.



THE SCHOLARSHIP

The scholarship that both Marianne and Connell receive at Trinity College represents the subtle and mostly unacknowledged tension surrounding the differences in their economic backgrounds. Whereas the scholarship significantly changes Connell's life by enabling him to travel in the summer, focus on school instead of working, and generally sustain himself in Dublin, it doesn't do much to impact Marianne's daily life. Rather, the scholarship for her is just something that makes her feel good about herself, since it's a prestigious scholarship that's only rewarded to people who score very high on a special exam. The opposing ways that Connell and Marianne view the scholarship therefore highlight the extent to which they view the world differently because of their upbringings: Connell is constantly aware of and embarrassed by his working-class background, whereas Marianne hardly ever thinks about her wealth, which is why she has no problem pursuing a scholarship that would probably better serve someone who actually needs financial assistance—someone, that is, in Connell's position. Simply put, Marianne can *afford* to not think about her financial circumstances, whereas Connell cannot, and the fact that they both receive the scholarship only brings out this disconnect between their experiences.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hogarth edition of *Normal People* published in 2020.

1. January 2011 Quotes

☞ Well, you're smarter than me.

Don't feel bad. I'm smarter than everyone.

Marianne is grinning now. 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. He dreads being left alone with her like this, but he also finds himself fantasizing about things he could say to impress her.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne (speaker), Lorraine (Connell's Mother)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Marianne's family employs Connell's mother, Lorraine, as a housecleaner, so Connell frequently comes to Marianne's house after school to pick up Lorraine. When he does so, he often has conversations with Marianne while waiting for Lorraine to finish. Their conversations are somewhat tense, since Connell feels self-conscious about talking to the least popular girl in school, about whom there are many rumors, like that she has a "mental illness" because of her grief (a gossipy idea that illustrates just how unkind people are to her).

At the same time, though, their brief exchanges hint at Connell and Marianne's interest in one another. In this moment, for instance, Connell says that Marianne is smarter than him. They've just received exam results, so they're talking about grades to pass the time. The fact that Connell admits that Marianne is smarter than him is significant, since he otherwise seems to want nothing to do with her. In response, she teases him by saying that he shouldn't feel bad, since she's "smarter than everyone." She's flirting with him. And, perhaps even more importantly, Connell is flirting with *her*, despite his reservations about becoming friendly with her—after all, he finds himself thinking about "things he could say to impress her," a clear sign that he cares what she thinks. Their conversation here thus illustrates the tension between Connell's obsession with popularity and his attraction to Marianne—a tension that will haunt them throughout their entire relationship.

●● If she wanted, she could make a big show of saying hello to Connell in school. See you this afternoon, she could say, in front of everyone. Undoubtedly it would put him in an awkward position, which is the kind of thing she usually seems to enjoy. But she has never done it.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Even before they establish a romantic bond, Connell and Marianne's relationship is secretive. Nobody talks about how Connell's mother cleans Marianne's house, and since he's extremely worried about his social status and popularity, he's eager to keep it that way. Marianne, however, has no real reason to keep it a secret that she and Connell talk on a semi-regular basis. She's the least popular girl in school, so she would have nothing to lose by saying hello to Connell in public. In fact, she'd only *gain* from other people finding out that they know each other. And yet, she doesn't approach him in school, suggesting that she respects his desire to keep their friendship private, even if doing so means acknowledging that everyone dislikes her. In a way, then, her silence is a form of self-degradation, as she tacitly recognizes that Connell finds her embarrassing. Alternatively, it's also possible that she doesn't say hello to Connell as a form of self-protection. If she went out of her way to talk to him in public, he might act like many of his popular friends and make fun of her, pretending that he doesn't actually know her. Of course, it becomes clear as the novel progresses that Connell probably wouldn't do such a thing, but Marianne certainly doesn't know that at this stage in their relationship.

●● Miss Neary teaches Economics. His supposed feelings for her are widely discussed in school. Some people are even saying that he tried to add her on Facebook, which he didn't and would never do. Actually he doesn't do or say anything to her, he just sits there quietly while she does and says things to him. She keeps him back after class sometimes to talk about his life direction, and once she actually touched the knot of his school tie. He can't tell people about the way she acts because they'll think he's trying to brag about it.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne, Miss Neary, Lorraine (Connell's Mother)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

As they wait for Lorraine to finish cleaning the house, Marianne playfully asks Connell if he's having an affair with Miss Neary, the economics teacher at their secondary school. It's a widespread joke that he has a thing for Miss Neary, but Connell doesn't find the joke funny. To the contrary, he actively tries to act uninterested in Miss Neary, but she still showers him with attention. It's quite clear that her behavior toward him is inappropriate, since she's his teacher and is much older than him, but nobody sees it this way. Rather, everyone laughs about it as if it isn't a big deal, which makes it hard for Connell to confide in his friends about how uncomfortable Miss Neary makes him. When she touches his tie, for example, he doesn't feel like he can talk about it with anyone, since they'd just think he's playing into the joke and trying to "brag." Connell's friends seem to believe in a certain stereotypical male fantasy that any young man would want to have sex with a young female teacher—an assumption that is quite inaccurate, as evidenced by Connell's negative reaction to the rumors about his supposed crush on Miss Neary.

●● What if, at some level above or below his own perception, he does actually desire her? He doesn't even really know what desire is supposed to feel like. Any time he has had sex in real life, he has found it so stressful as to be largely unpleasant, leading him to suspect that there's something wrong with him, that he's unable to be intimate with women, that he's somehow developmentally impaired.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne, Miss Neary

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Even though Connell hates the rumor that he has a crush on Miss Neary, he finds himself wondering if he "does actually desire her." The mere fact that he questions himself on this topic illustrates just how little clarity he has about his own feelings. Given that he felt uncomfortable when Miss Neary touched his tie, it's quite clear that he doesn't appreciate her attention and, moreover, doesn't want to have sex with her. And yet, he second-guesses himself because he has

never experienced what real “desire” feels like—he has only ever had sex that felt “stressful,” indicating that he’s never been romantically involved with someone with whom he feels a genuine connection. As a result, he assumes there must be some kind of problem with him. Instead of trusting his own feelings, he assumes that other people know him better than he knows himself: if everyone in school says he has a crush on Miss Neary, he thinks, then maybe he *does* have a crush on her, regardless of how he actually feels. His lack of self-assurance surrounding this topic illustrates his overall sense of insecurity and his tendency to place too much importance on other people’s opinions, allowing the way people perceive him to dictate how he actually thinks about his own life.

☞ When he talks to Marianne he has a sense of total privacy between them. He could tell her anything about himself, even weird things, and she would never repeat them, he knows that. Being alone with her is like opening a door away from normal life and then closing it behind him. He’s not frightened of her, actually she’s a pretty relaxed person, but he fears being around her, because of the confusing way he finds himself behaving, the things he says that he would never ordinarily say.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

As he stands in Marianne’s house waiting for his mother to finish cleaning, Connell reflects on the way he feels whenever he talks to Marianne. As a popular boy at school, so much of his life feels extremely public, as if everyone is watching him. In fact, it’s revealed elsewhere in the novel that people often talk about his sex life—when he has sex with people, they often tell their friends about it the next day, giving a play-by-play that eventually makes its way throughout the school, meaning that Connell’s friends frequently end up narrating his own sexual experience back to him. Consequently, the sense of privacy surrounding his secret friendship with Marianne feels remarkable to Connell, as if he’s “opening a door away from normal life and then closing it behind him”—an idea that frames his connection with Marianne as an escape from all the things in his life that he doesn’t like. In other words, she gives him the opportunity to simply be himself, but because he’s not used to such a thing, this feeling of privacy (or perhaps even *intimacy*) feels “confusing” and strange.

2. Three Weeks Later (February 2011) Quotes

☞ Matter-of-factly he replied: You act different in class, you’re not really like that. He seemed to think Marianne had access to a range of different identities, between which she slipped effortlessly. This surprised her, because she usually felt confined inside one single personality, which was always the same regardless of what she did or said. She had tried to be different in the past, as a kind of experiment, but it had never worked. If she was different with Connell, the difference was not happening inside herself, in her personhood, but in between them, in the dynamic.

Related Characters: Marianne, Connell

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 13-14

Explanation and Analysis

In a self-deprecating way, Marianne suggests at one point that Connell probably gets sick of listening to her voice her opinions when they’re in school. But Connell claims that she acts differently in school—a suggestion that surprises Marianne, since she doesn’t think she actually has “access to a range of different identities.” Instead, she thinks she’s always more or less the same person. The only difference between how she acts in school and how she behaves when she’s alone with Connell has to do with the circumstances; her behavior isn’t any different, but their relationship takes on a different quality when they’re alone, so it *feels* to Connell like she changes. In fact, if anyone changes in private, it’s probably Connell, not Marianne. His suggestion that she has two different ways of behaving really just hints at his own desire to compartmentalize his relationship with her. Because he’s embarrassed to have feelings for her, he wants to believe that Marianne acts differently when she’s with him. But the truth is that he likes the same exact Marianne whom his friends mock, and this makes him feel insecure. It’s therefore easier for him to tell himself that he likes a different version of her.

3. One Month Later (March 2011) Quotes

☞ I like you so much, Marianne said. Connell felt a pleasurable sorrow come over him, which brought him close to tears. Moments of emotional pain arrived like this, meaningless or at least indecipherable. Marianne lived a drastically free life, he could see that. He was trapped by various considerations. He cared what people thought of him. He even cared what Marianne thought, that was obvious now.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 26



Explanation and Analysis

After they have sex, Marianne tells Connell how much she likes him, and he experiences a feeling of “pleasurable sorrow.” That this “sorrow” frequently comes over him in “moments of emotional pain” indicates that he struggles with feelings of depression—a fact that will become even more pronounced later in the novel. For now, though, he seems to enjoy his “sorrow” a little bit, perhaps because it’s tied to Marianne. He’s most likely sad because he recognizes how good their relationship makes him feel and, as a result, he has to acknowledge how ridiculous it is that he won’t just own up to his feelings and publicly date Marianne. To that end, he feels “trapped” by “considerations” surrounding social status and popularity. Marianne, on the other hand, lives “drastically free” from such arbitrary considerations. She is simply herself, regardless of the fact that everyone in school dislikes her.

As he thinks about Marianne’s “free” way of moving through the world, it becomes clear that Connell envies her ability to not care what other people think, though it’s quite possible that he overestimates her lack of concern in this regard. After all, just because she has learned to live with the knowledge that everyone dislikes her doesn’t mean she doesn’t care what others think. She has simply learned to tolerate her unpopularity because there’s nothing else she can do.

☛ 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. He has a life in Carricklea, he has friends. If he went to college in Galway he could stay with the same social group, really, and live the life he has always planned on, getting a good degree, having a nice girlfriend. People would say he had done well for himself. On the other hand, he could go to Trinity like Marianne. Life would be different then. He would start going to dinner parties and having conversations about the Greek bailout. [...] After that he would never come back to Carricklea, he would go somewhere else, London, or Barcelona. People would not necessarily think he had done well; some people might think he had gone very bad, while others would forget about him entirely.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis




Connell tries to decide between going to college close to home or attending school in Dublin, which is where Marianne wants to go. As he weighs his decision, he thinks about how the choice will shape his identity. Once again, he doesn’t necessarily try to make decisions based on what he wants for himself. Instead, he considers what *other* people will think about his choice. Staying near Carricklea would enable him to lead the life he’s basically already living. He always assumed he would stay on this track, but now his relationship with Marianne has broadened his horizons. Whereas living near home would give him a safe, predictable path through life, going to Trinity in Dublin would open up all kinds of new doors. Unsurprisingly, Connell thinks about these new possibilities by reflecting on what kind of person he would become if he lived in Dublin, conjuring up an image of a cultured individual who likes to talk about international politics. But he doesn’t really think much about what would make *him* happy. Instead, he tries to guess what people in Carricklea would think of him if he left home, assuming that they’d hold it against him. As such, he allows his fear of being seen as pretentious to muddy his decision-making, not wanting to be seen as a privileged snob—despite the fact that he isn’t privileged in the first place (at least not financially).

☛ Then we’d both be in Dublin, he says. I bet you’d pretend you didn’t know me if we bumped into each other.

Marianne says nothing at first. The longer she stays silent the more nervous he feels, like maybe she really would pretend not to know him, and the idea of being beneath her notice gives him a panicked feeling, not only about Marianne personally but about his future, about what’s possible for him.

Then she says: I would never pretend not to know you, Connell.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

As Connell talks to Marianne about whether or not he should apply to Trinity, he accidentally makes an ignorant

comment by joking that she would probably pretend not to know him if she saw him on campus. His joke is rooted in an overall sense of insecurity, as he fears that everyone at Trinity would be wealthy and privileged like Marianne and, as a result, that he wouldn't fit in. But by making this joke, he fails to realize (until it's too late, that is) that he's currently doing that exact thing to her in secondary school: he pretends he doesn't know her when they see each other in the halls and in class. His insecurity about feeling inferior at Trinity distracts him, so he ends up accidentally acknowledging that it's (obviously) unkind to ignore a loved one for the sake of popularity or social status. In turn, his joke gives Marianne a chance to make him feel bad about his behavior—something she never does. It's notable that this is one of the first times they've even alluded to how unfair their current arrangement really is. Instead of simply talking about it openly, they dance around the topic until it inevitably comes up on its own, ultimately illustrating the lack of effective communication in their relationship.

4. Six Weeks Later (April 2011) Quotes

☝☝ Connell is silent again. He leans down and kisses her on the forehead. I would never hurt you, okay? he says. Never. She nods and says nothing. You make me really happy, he says. His hand moves over her hair and he adds: I love you. I'm not just saying that, I really do. Her eyes fill up with tears again and she closes them. Even in memory she will find this moment unbearably intense, and she's aware of this now, while it's happening. 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.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

At a school fundraiser, a man assaults Marianne by grabbing her breast, so Connell takes her back to his house, where they lie in bed together. Because she has just experienced a jarring physical assault, Marianne tells Connell that her father used to hit her when he was still alive. She also asks if Connell would ever hit a woman. In response, Connell not only assures her that he would never hurt her, but also says that he loves her. Although he'll later wonder if what he said is actually true, his declaration of love has a profound effect on Marianne, who "has never believed herself fit to be loved

by any person." Her sense that she's undeserving of love factors heavily into the way she conducts herself in romantic relationships, especially later in the novel, when she starts seeking out unhealthy relationships that validate her insecurities. For now, though, the fact that Connell loves her changes the way she sees her own life, making her feel as if her real life has finally begun. In turn, it becomes clear just how much influence Connell has on Marianne, whose sense of self seems at least partially tied to their relationship.

5. Two Days Later (April 2011) Quotes

☝☝ After the fundraiser the other night, Marianne told him this thing about her family. He didn't know what to say. He started telling her that he loved her. It just happened, like drawing your hand back when you touch something hot. She was crying and everything, and he just said it without thinking. Was it true? He didn't know enough to know that. At first he thought it must have been true, since he said it, and why would he lie? But then he remembered he does lie sometimes, without planning to or knowing why. It wasn't the first time he'd had the urge to tell Marianne that he loved her, whether or not it was true, but it was the first time he'd given in and said it. [...] Connell wished he knew how other people conducted their private lives, so that he could copy from example.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 50-51

Explanation and Analysis



Normal People often narrates a scene while focusing on either Marianne or Connell's perspective and then goes back to narrate the same scene while focusing on the *other* person's perspective. In this case, the novel backtracks to provide insight into what Connell thinks about having said "I love you" to Marianne. She had just told him that her father used to hit her sometimes, and then he found himself expressing his love—but he's no longer sure about his feelings. He felt confident in the moment, but now he second-guesses himself. In all likelihood, he *does* love her, considering that he has thought about saying it before but has never "given in and said it." The phrase "given in" suggests that he has been actively keeping himself from telling Marianne that he loves her, which implies that he knows—on some level, at least—how he feels about her. But Connell has trouble articulating his feelings, even to himself, so it's difficult for him to decide whether or not he meant

what he said. As such, he obsesses over the matter and feels overwhelmed by the idea that he might actually love Marianne.

7. Three Months Later (November 2011) Quotes

☝ Back home, Connell's shyness never seemed like much of an obstacle to his social life, because everyone knew who he was already, and there was never any need to introduce himself or create impressions about his personality. If anything, his personality seemed like something external to himself, managed by the opinions of others, rather than anything he individually did or produced. Now he has a sense of invisibility, nothingness, with no reputation to recommend him to anyone.

Related Characters: Connell

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

When Connell goes to college in Dublin, he has a hard time meeting people and making friends. He has always been shy, so it's not necessarily surprising that he finds it difficult to get to know other people. But his "shyness" never really mattered in secondary school because he already belonged to a tightknit group of people. Because he grew up with his friends, he never really had to put himself out there or make an effort to introduce himself to them—all of his friends already knew him. At the same time, though, the fact that his friends knew him was also somewhat problematic, since he often felt boxed in by his social group. In fact, even though Connell now thinks that his friends in Carricklea knew him well, it was evident in secondary school that he didn't feel like they truly understood him. That's partially why his relationship with Marianne was so liberating, since she simply allowed him to be himself, whereas his other friends expected him to conform to their way of life. In a way, then, Connell's thoughts about his friends in secondary school are somewhat idealized. He feels out of place at Trinity, so in his memories, he glorifies his friendships in secondary school, failing to remember that he felt a sense of "invisibility" among his childhood friends, too.

☝ Do you think we don't know you were riding her? he said. Sure everyone knows.

Connell paused and took another drag on his cigarette. This was probably the most horrifying thing Eric could have said to him, not because it ended his life, but because it didn't. He knew then that the secret for which he had sacrificed his own happiness and the happiness of another person had been trivial all along, and worthless. He and Marianne could have walked down the school corridors hand in hand, and with what consequence? Nothing really. No one cared.

Related Characters: Eric (speaker), Connell, Marianne

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

After Connell tells Marianne that he asked Rachel to the end-of-year dance, Marianne stops talking to him and no longer goes to school. At the dance, Connell steps outside for a cigarette, and Eric tells him that everyone at school knew there was something going on between him and Marianne. All this time, Connell has thought their relationship was a secret. In reality, though, his friends have sensed that they were together in some capacity. For months, Connell fretted about other people finding out, so he expects to be distraught in this moment—and he is, except not in the way he would have thought. His social life hasn't crumbled, nor has he lost any of his friends. To the contrary, nothing has happened at all: everyone knows that he likes Marianne, and nobody even cares. The reason this is "horrifying" is that Connell ruined an otherwise good relationship in order to save face with his friends, but now he sees how arbitrary that was. In the end, he not only "sacrificed his own happiness," but also deeply hurt Marianne, and it was all for nothing: he could have "walked down the school corridors hand in hand" with her, and everything would have been completely fine—a good illustration of how Connell cares too much about what other people think, overinflating the importance of popularity and social status.

☝ He knows she's acting funny and coy because she wants to show him that she's not bitter. He could say: I'm really sorry for what I did to you, Marianne. He always thought, if he did see her again, that's what he would say. Somehow she doesn't seem to admit that possibility, or maybe he's being cowardly, or both.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 84



Explanation and Analysis

When Connell and Marianne run into each other for the first time at Trinity, Connell is pleasantly surprised to discover that Marianne is eager to forget about their ugly past. She jokes around and even flirts with him as a way of showing him that “she’s not bitter” about how poorly he treated her in secondary school. Her willingness to move on hints at her overall sense of selflessness when it comes to her relationship with Connell—a relationship she often prioritizes over all else. Still, though, Connell has been planning on apologizing to her if he ever gets the chance, and though she’s standing right in front of him now, he can’t bring himself to say anything. Of course, his inability to apologize is partially because she makes such a graceful effort to act like there’s no hard feelings between them, but it’s also a good illustration of his struggle to articulate his feelings. He feels genuinely bad for hurting Marianne, and though he wants to express how much he regrets his unkind behavior, he can’t quite manage to do it.

9. Two Months Later (April 2012) Quotes

☝☝ He got back into bed beside her and kissed her face. She had been sad before, after the film, but now she was happy. It was in Connell's power to make her happy. It was something he could just give to her like money or sex. With other people she seemed so independent and remote, but with Connell she was different, a different person. He was the only one who knew her like that.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

At one point during their first year of college, when Marianne and Connell are unofficially dating, Marianne goes home for the weekend. When she returns, she seems sad and unsettled; she even cries after she and Connell watch a movie, and Connell slowly discerns that she’s upset because of something that happened with her family while she was at home. They talk a little about it, but not very

much. Instead, Connell pleasures her sexually, and suddenly she seems “happy” again. He marvels at how much he can impact her overall mood, but what he fails to recognize is that he hasn’t actually addressed the thing that made her sad in the first place—he just distracted her with physical intimacy. To that end, their relationship is often structured around sex, as they frequently express their passion for one another through physicality. When they try to have intimate conversations, though, they often feel confused and frustrated by their inability to properly express themselves. Still, though, Connell enjoys the fact that he can help Marianne feel happy, though he will later become weary of the outsized amount of power he seems to have in their relationship.

☝☝ She comes to sit down with him and he touches her cheek. He has a terrible sense all of a sudden that he could hit her face, very hard even, and she would just sit there and let him. The idea frightens him so badly that he pulls his chair back and stands up. His hands are shaking. He doesn't know why he thought about it. Maybe he wants to do it. But it makes him feel sick.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne, Peggy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Connell feels overwhelmed by the intensity of his relationship with Marianne, especially when it comes to how much she prioritizes him over her own wellbeing. They have just had a conversation with Peggy, who asked Connell if he’d like to have a threesome with her and Marianne. Connell was mortified, feeling like he’d never be able to do such a thing. But he also struggled to articulate that, feeling embarrassed and awkward. Sensing his discomfort, Marianne jumped in and said that she wouldn’t be able to have a threesome because she’d be too “self-conscious.” When Peggy left, Connell thanked Marianne, who said she didn’t want to have a threesome, either, though she would have done it if Connell wanted to. In response, he said she shouldn’t do things she doesn’t want to do, but she brushed this off, trying to explain that she would enjoy the feeling of going out of her way to please him.

With this conversation serving as a backdrop, Connell suddenly worries about the influence he has over Marianne—he could do anything, he realizes, and she



wouldn't hold it against him. He could even hit her, he thinks, and she would let him do it. It's clear that he doesn't *want* to hit her, but the mere idea frightens him, as if simply thinking such a thing means that he actually wants to hurt her. In reality, his entire reaction isn't a sign that he wants to mistreat her, but a sense of shock upon realizing just how much she will prioritize his desires over her own. It is, after all, an intense and overwhelming thing for somebody to sacrifice their own desires (and even their own wellbeing) for someone else, and Connell struggles with the responsibility that comes along with that kind of relationship.

economic backgrounds, and although Connell certainly thinks about the matter a fair amount, he doesn't discuss it. As a result, talking about moving into Marianne's apartment for financial reasons feels like a big deal to Connell, since it would—in some ways—acknowledge the vast gap between their financial circumstances. However, there's nothing *wrong* with acknowledging that gap. To the contrary, it would probably be good for their relationship if they ended up talking about their different backgrounds. Instead, though, Connell avoids the topic, making it that much harder to ask if he can stay with Marianne—something she'd certainly love for him to ask.

11. Six Weeks Later (September 2012) Quotes

☝☝ He could just tell her about the situation and ask if he could stay in her place until September. He knew she would say yes. He thought she would say yes, it was hard to imagine her not saying yes. But he found himself putting off the conversation, putting off Niall's enquiries about it, planning 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. 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.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne, Niall, Lorraine (Connell's Mother), Denise (Marianne's Mother)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

When the restaurant Connell works at in Dublin closes, he realizes he won't have enough money to pay rent over the summer, nor does he have enough time to find a new job. Consequently, he plans to ask Marianne if he can move in with her for the summer. He stays there most nights of the week anyway, so he knows it shouldn't be a big deal. And yet, it *becomes* a big deal because he keeps putting off the conversation. Connell is very aware of the class disparity between himself and Marianne, but that aspect of the relationship doesn't come up very often. Instead of talking about money, they act like they aren't from wildly different

☝☝ Hey, listen. By the way. It looks like I won't be able to pay rent up here this summer. Marianne looked up from her coffee and said flatly: What?

Yeah, he said. I'm going to have to move out of Niall's place.

When? said Marianne.

Pretty soon. Next week maybe.

Her face hardened, without displaying any particular emotion. Oh, she said. You'll be going home, then.

He rubbed at his breastbone then, feeling short of breath. Looks like it, yeah, he said.

[...]

He couldn't understand how this had happened, how he had let the discussion slip away like this. It was too late to say he wanted to stay with her, that was clear, but when had it become too late? It seemed to have happened immediately.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 127-128


Explanation and Analysis

After putting it off for weeks, Connell finally asks Marianne if he can stay with her for the summer. But he doesn't simply come out and say, "Can I stay with you this summer?" Instead, he prefaces the question by saying that he won't be able to afford his rent—and then he stops, waiting for her to say something. The reason he doesn't come right out with the question is probably that he wants *her* to be the one to suggest that he move in for the summer. That way, he wouldn't feel like he's asking her for a handout, since he'd just be taking her up on a nice offer. But his approach backfires because Marianne doesn't know he wants to stay

with her. In fact, she assumes the opposite, thinking he's already made plans to leave Dublin. In other words, she assumes the worst: rather than thinking that he wants to live with her in order to continue their relationship, she thinks he wants to leave her behind. To make matters worse, Connell is so insecure about his lack of financial stability that he can't bring himself to correct Marianne, so he ends up saying that he intends to leave Dublin. It's the exact opposite of what he wanted to happen, which is why he feels like the conversation "slip[ped] away" from him. And though he thinks it's "clear" that it's "too late" for him to say that he wants to stay with Marianne, that's not actually the case—he could just explain what he originally meant to ask, but because he has trouble articulating himself, doing that feels impossible.

●● 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.

Related Characters: Marianne (speaker), Connell

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Having just told Connell that Jamie likes to beat her up during intercourse, Marianne tries to explain what she gets out of having rough sex. In particular, she tries to articulate what it feels like to be "degraded." But she goes out of her way to note that she doesn't necessarily *like* being degraded—in and of itself, that doesn't give her any kind of sexual pleasure. Rather, it's the general *idea* of being degraded that she gravitates toward, since she likes knowing that she would sacrifice her own pleasure in order to gratify her lover. What she describes is exactly what Connell himself struggled with when he realized how intense their relationship was. When she told him that she'd have a threesome with him even though she wouldn't actually want to, he became overwhelmed and anxious, thinking about the fact that he could probably hit her and she wouldn't even do anything. What bothered him was that she was so eager to prioritize his desire over her own happiness and wellbeing. Now, as he listens to her talk

about having rough sex with Jamie, she confirms his worries, making it clear that she really *does* prioritize her partner's needs over her own, even when doing so conflicts with what she wants.

●● Anyway, she says. How are you?

He knows the question is meant honestly. 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.

Something kind of weird happened to me in the summer, he said. Can I tell you about it?

Related Characters: Marianne, Connell (speaker), Miss Neary

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

After not seeing each other for the summer, Connell and Marianne meet for coffee. She tells him about her relationship with Jamie, the details of which upset him, but when she asks how he's doing, he can't help but feel intimately tied to her. She is, he realizes (not necessarily for the first time), the only person in his life he can really *talk* to. She's not just asking how he is to be polite—she really wants to know how he's doing. Her companionship and emotional support are so important, in fact, that he feels as if he "needs her." After all, he doesn't open up to anyone else, so she serves as his only emotional outlet. As such, she's the sole person he feels comfortable talking to about his experience with Miss Neary, who took advantage of him over the summer when he was drunk. Even though Connell is terrible at communicating with Marianne when it comes to talking about their own relationship, then, he *does* feel capable of talking about his feelings with her—it's just that those feelings often get messy and confusing when they happen to be about their romantic bond.

12. Four Months Later (January 2013) Quotes

☝☝ You know, I didn't really know what was going on with us last summer, he says. Like, when I had to move home and that. I kind of thought maybe you would let me stay here or something. I don't really know what happened with us in the end.

She feels a sharp pain in her chest and her hand flies to her throat, clutching at nothing.



You told me you wanted us to see other people, she says. I had no idea you wanted to stay here. I thought you were breaking up with me.

He rubs his palm flat against his mouth for a second, and then breathes out.

You didn't say anything about wanting to stay here, she adds. You would have been welcome, obviously. You always were.

Right, okay, he says. Look, I'll head off, then. Have a good night, yeah?

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place the winter after Connell moved back to Carricklea. He was unable to work up the courage to ask Marianne if he could stay with her for the summer, but now he finally tells her that he never intended to leave. The way he phrases this is quite telling, since he says, "I kind of thought maybe you would let me stay here or something." The word "let" is misleading because it almost sounds as if the only reason Connell ended up leaving was because Marianne refused to "let" him stay with her. In reality, though, the reason he left was that he never communicated his desire to stay with her in the first place. Marianne very clearly points this out when she notes that he didn't even "say anything about wanting to stay" with her. What's more, she says he would have been "welcome." She even uses the word "obviously," suggesting that Connell was a fool to ever think she wouldn't want him to live in her apartment.

In fact, it really *was* obvious that Connell was "welcome" to stay—even Connell himself knew it would be no problem, but he still couldn't straightforwardly ask Marianne. And as if their original miscommunication isn't enough, he doesn't even fully respond to Marianne's comment about him being "welcome" to stay, instead just saying, "Right, okay," and leaving. Once again, then, he fails to talk openly about his feelings, thus leaving their emotionally confusing conversation unresolved.

13. Six Months Later (July 2013) Quotes

☝☝ Helen has given Connell a new way to live. It's as if an impossibly heavy lid has been lifted off his emotional life and suddenly he can breathe fresh air. It is physically possible to type and send a message reading: I love you! It had never seemed possible before, not remotely, but in fact it's easy. Of course if someone saw the messages he would be embarrassed, but he knows now that this is a normal kind of embarrassment, [...]. He can sit down to dinner with Helen's parents, he can accompany her to her friends' parties, he can tolerate the smiling and the exchange of repetitive conversation. [...] When she touches him spontaneously, applying a little pressure to his arm, or even reaching to brush a piece of lint off his collar, he feels a rush of pride, and hopes that people are watching them.

Related Characters: Connell, Helen, Marianne

Related Themes:   


Page Number: 160-161


Explanation and Analysis

Connell's relationship with Helen is much different than his relationship with Marianne. With Helen, he feels like it's relatively easy to articulate his feelings. He can even send her a message saying, "I love you!" without overthinking it. With Marianne, on the other hand, he ends up confessing his love in extremely intense moments, like when Marianne first told him that her father used to hit her. His relationship with Helen seems healthier on the whole: he can communicate openly with her, he feels like he fits in with her family and friends, and he doesn't feel compelled to keep their relationship secretive and private. None of these things are true of his relationship with Marianne, implying that sometimes the most passionate, emotionally intense relationships aren't necessarily the ones that are healthy and rewarding. At the same time, though, Connell and Marianne keep coming back to each other, and though Connell is clearly happy in his relationship with Helen, it's unclear at this point in the novel whether or not their bond will be able to take priority over the burning passion that comes along with Connell's feelings for Marianne.

Everything is possible now because of the scholarship. His rent is paid, his tuition is covered, he has a free meal every day in college. This is why he's been able to spend half the summer traveling around Europe, disseminating currency with the care-free attitude of a rich person. He's explained it, or tried to explain it, in his emails to Marianne. For her the scholarship was a self-esteem boost, a happy confirmation of what she has always believed about herself anyway: that she's special. Connell has never really known whether to believe that about himself, and he still doesn't know. For him the scholarship is a gigantic material fact, like a vast cruise ship that has sailed into view out of nowhere, and suddenly he can do a postgraduate program for free if he wants to, and live in Dublin for free, and never think about rent again until he finishes college.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

Both Marianne and Connell receive the same prestigious, highly selective scholarship that pays for all of their expenses. Connell takes the scholarship exams for obvious reasons, since he genuinely needs money to support his academic pursuits. But Marianne takes the exams for entirely different reasons—reasons that have to do with “self-esteem.” She doesn’t need any financial assistance, but she wants the results to confirm that she’s “special” because she’s intellectually gifted. When she receives the scholarship, then, she just feels a sense of reassurance that allows her to feel good about herself. In contrast, the scholarship significantly changes the entire quality of Connell’s life as a young man who was, until this point, financially struggling to put himself through school. Indeed, the scholarship money isn’t some abstract “confirmation” that he’s smart, it’s a “material fact,” meaning that it has a tangible impact on his life. All of a sudden, he can do seemingly whatever he wants, which is why he’s able to travel in Europe for the summer instead of having to spend his free time working. The fact that both Marianne and Connell receive the same scholarship just brings out the differences in their financial circumstances, emphasizing the disparity between their economic backgrounds.

Connell thinks the aspects of himself that are most compatible with Helen are his best aspects: his loyalty, his basically practical outlook, his desire to be thought of as a good guy. With Helen he doesn't feel shameful things, he doesn't find himself saying weird stuff during sex, he doesn't have that persistent sensation that he belongs nowhere, that he never will belong anywhere. Marianne had a wildness that got into him for a while and made him feel that he was like her, that they had the same unnameable spiritual injury, and that neither of them could ever fit into the world. But he was never damaged like she was. She just made him feel that way.

Related Characters: Connell, Marianne, Helen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

Connell can't help but compare his relationship with Helen to his previous relationship with Marianne, perhaps because the two are so different. Most importantly, he focuses not necessarily on the differences between Helen and Marianne as people, but on the way that *he* acts when he's with them, thus suggesting that he imbues his romantic relationships with the power to influence his identity. The fact that his relationship with Helen bolsters his “best aspects” therefore suggests that it's the healthier connection.



And yet, the actual qualities listed here are somewhat basic and unemotional, since he likes that his relationship with Helen emphasizes things like his “loyalty” and pragmatism, as well as his “desire to be thought of as a good guy.” It's all well and good if Helen brings these qualities out in Connell, but they aren't necessarily the top things most people look for in a romantic relationship. Marianne, on the other hand, made Connell feel as if he couldn't help but act “shameful,” since he'd often find himself saying “weird stuff during sex”; he thinks Marianne has a “wildness that got into him.” It's certainly the case that their relationship was passionate and illogical, and it's also quite likely that Connell's relationship with Helen is healthier. But what Connell really seems to dislike about his relationship with Marianne is the simple fact that he found it hard to maintain a sense of control over his own emotions—their bond was so intense that it overrode all other considerations. And since Connell is a naturally reserved person, such an all-consuming passion felt disarming and uncomfortable.

18. Seven Months Later (February 2015) Quotes

☝☝ He probably won't come back, she thinks. Or he will, differently. What they have now they can never have back again. 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. Meanwhile his life opens out before him in all directions at once. They've done a lot of good for each other. Really, she thinks, really. People can really change one another.

You should go, she says. I'll always be here. You know that.

Related Characters: Marianne (speaker), Connell

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 273

Explanation and Analysis

These are the last lines of *Normal People*, when Connell has just discovered that he gained admission into a graduate Creative Writing program in New York. He's hesitant to go, since he didn't even think he'd get in when he first applied. But Marianne—who's mad at first that he never told her about applying—tells him to go. But he doesn't like the idea

of leaving her behind. He wouldn't even have come to Dublin if it weren't for her, so he can't imagine what life would be like without her. Still, Marianne encourages him to go to New York, even though she knows that it will most likely bring an end to their relationship, or at least will end their relationship as they currently know it, since Connell would inevitably be different upon his return.

Marianne's thought process here highlights just how much *Normal People* is really a novel about two people growing up alongside each other. Connell and Marianne have been integral parts of each other's lives since they were just 17. They've been with each other for the formative years of college, and they've helped each other grow in important ways. Marianne, for her part, no longer feels "unworthy" of love; Connell has helped her recognize that she deserves love, so she no longer struggles with the "loneliness" of feeling cut off from that kind of affection. In turn, Marianne has helped push Connell out of his comfort zone by encouraging him to leave home. In that way, she made it possible for him to broaden his horizons, which is exactly what she does now by telling him to go New York: their relationship has helped them grow, and they will always have that to hold onto, even if it's now time to move on.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

1. JANUARY 2011

Connell arrives at Marianne's house, which is actually a mansion. Although they're classmates, Connell and Marianne never interact at school. In fact, Connell's only at her house to pick up his mother, Lorraine, who works as a cleaner for Marianne's family. He tries not to say much, not wanting to engage in conversation, but his mother is still finishing up the cleaning, so he has no choice but to talk to Marianne. As Lorraine leaves the room to change the laundry, Marianne and Connell talk about grades, each of them subtly complimenting the other for being quite smart.

Nobody in school knows that Lorraine is Marianne's house cleaner, so it's a secret that Connell and Marianne have these fleeting interactions. Still waiting for his mother, Connell suggests that Marianne is smarter than him, and she teasingly says that he shouldn't feel bad, since she's smarter than everyone. And Connell thinks that's probably true—Marianne spends all of her time reading because she doesn't have any friends.

All of Marianne's fellow students show her outright contempt. They spread rumors about her and talk about how she developed a mental illness after her father died when she was 13. They also say that she doesn't shave her legs and that once she spilled ice cream on herself and took off her entire shirt in the bathroom to wash it. For some reason, this story is very popular—everyone talks about it. Connell knows she could easily humiliate him by talking to him in school, but she never does. He's thankful for that, but he still doesn't like having to talk to her while he waits for his mother. And yet, he also finds himself trying to think of things to say that might impress her.

The first scene of Normal People establishes the strange circumstances surrounding the beginning of Connell and Marianne's relationship. The fact that they compliment each other for being smart suggests that they have a mutual respect for one another—and yet, they don't interact in public, hinting that there's something keeping them from fully leaning into their friendship. The opening scene also establishes the class disparity between Marianne and Connell, since Connell's mother works for Marianne's family. As they grow closer throughout the novel, the difference in their economic circumstances that is evident here will continue to hover in the background of their relationship.



The reason Marianne and Connell don't interact in school becomes clear: Marianne is unpopular. The fact that Connell goes out of his way to avoid her in public suggests that he lets popular opinion dictate his life. Because everyone at school dislikes Marianne, he only feels as if he can talk to her in private, even if he respects her. It's clear, then, that he's insecure about his public image and doesn't want to do anything to jeopardize his social status. At the same time, their conversation has a friendly, almost flirtatious quality, since they underhandedly compliment and tease each other, indicating that, despite Connell's hesitancy to be friends with her, there's an undeniable attraction between them.



The stories about Marianne are gossipy and scandalous, but they don't have much to do with who she is as a person—they're just stories. Connell seems to sense the discrepancy between her public image and her actual identity, considering that he finds himself wanting to talk to her and even impress her, essentially suggesting that there's something about her that he finds appealing. And yet, he can't quite ignore the fact that she's considered a social outcast. He therefore experiences some cognitive dissonance: he thinks he shouldn't enjoy talking to her, but he clearly does.



The only subject Marianne isn't better than Connell in is English. She jokingly suggests that he should tutor her, and the comment unsettles Connell—is she just teasing him, or is she hinting at something suggestive about their relationship? The conversation soon moves to their economics teacher, Miss Neary, whom everyone says Connell could sleep with if he wanted. Marianne makes a joke about Connell having an affair with her, but he doesn't laugh. He doesn't think it's funny to joke about that, so she quickly apologizes. After a moment, he admits that Miss Neary *does* treat him in a way that makes him uncomfortable, and Marianne agrees that Neary is openly flirtatious with him in class.

Everyone in school talks about how Connell wants to sleep with Miss Neary. Some people even say that he tried to add her as a friend on Facebook, which is untrue. He actively tries to avoid her attention, but she singles him out and often tells him to stay after class to talk about his future. Once, she even touched his tie in a way that made him uncomfortable, but he can't tell anyone about this because they'll think he's bragging. He also worries that maybe, on some level, he's inviting Miss Neary's attention. He asks Marianne if it seems like he actually likes Miss Neary, and she assures him that it doesn't.

Even if Connell *did* want to sleep with Miss Neary, he wouldn't even know what that kind of sexual desire feels like. Every time he's had sex, he has felt anxious and awkward. He worries there must be something wrong with him, thinking he's somehow incapable of intimacy.

Marianne offers to secretly report that Miss Neary acts inappropriately toward Connell. He's horrified by this idea and tells her not to say anything. Even though Marianne assures him that how Miss Neary treats him isn't his fault, he quietly wonders aloud why everyone thinks he likes her. Marianne then suggests that it must be because he blushes when she speaks to him—but that doesn't mean anything, she adds, because he *always* blushes. He's even blushing right now.

The flirtatious side of Marianne and Connell's relationship brings itself to bear on their conversation when Marianne teases Connell by asking him to tutor her—something that would require them to spend even more time alone with each other. But Connell doesn't like the suggestive nature of this comment because it subtly hints that they're closer to each other than he'd like to think. What he says about Miss Neary making him uncomfortable also implies that he's not like his friends at school, who think it's funny to joke about students having affairs with teachers; Connell is more sensitive than that, and though Marianne makes fun of him at first, she clearly realizes her mistake and, instead of continuing to poke fun, validates his feelings as a way of emotionally supporting him with what she can see is a troubling topic for him.



Connell's discomfort about the way Miss Neary treats him provides insight into the way he views his own emotions—although he doesn't like the inappropriate attention she gives him, he wonders if he's somehow encouraging her to treat him the way she does. In other words, he doesn't think he's interested in Miss Neary, but because everyone says he is, he second-guesses himself. It thus becomes clear that he struggles to achieve a sense of emotional clarity, even when it's rather obvious what he truly feels.



Even though Connell is well-liked and considered quite popular, he isn't a very confident person. In particular, his insecurities seem to revolve around issues related to romance and intimacy. The fact that he doesn't know what true sexual desire feels like serves as an important reminder that he's still quite young and, as such, has yet to figure out how to navigate certain complex and mature aspects of adult life.



Marianne's offer to report Miss Neary is supportive and kind. It's also significant that she offers to stand up for him while everyone else in school—including his friends—just make jokes about the matter. In a way, then, Marianne is more emotionally in touch with Connell than any of his actual friends, even if he refuses to acknowledge her in public.



Marianne's comment about Connell blushing puts him on edge, so he looks out the window in silence. He thinks about the story of Marianne washing her shirt in the bathroom. The only reason people repeat the story, he thinks, is because they're morbidly interested in her life, which she keeps private. Nobody even knows if she likes boys or girls, and Connell thinks people resent her for this secrecy. Marianne tries to apologize for offending him, saying that she doesn't want to fight with him because, although he probably hates her, he's the only person who ever talks to her. He tells her that he doesn't hate her, causing her to suddenly look up at him.

Even though everyone at school ostracizes Marianne and makes fun of her, Connell recognizes that her mistreatment comes with a certain fascination: she's mysterious to Connell's friends, largely because she doesn't follow social norms for the sake of pleasing others. In a way, then, she represents the kind of confidence and independence that Connell himself seems to lack, since she's unapologetically herself, whereas he polices himself to make sure he remains popular. Still, he's at least willing to show her kindness (albeit in private), and this is a big deal for her, since everyone is usually so mean to her.



Connell finds it confusing to be around Marianne. There's a deep sense of privacy in their conversations. He knows that he could tell her anything—even really weird thoughts—and she wouldn't repeat them to anyone. It flusters him to know this. He stands in silence as she looks at him now, and there's something intense about the moment. In response to him saying that he doesn't hate her, she says that she likes him. Then Lorraine comes back and asks if he's ready to go, and he quickly makes for the door. He only says goodbye when his mother reminds him to. In the car, Lorraine tells him to be nicer to Marianne because she's a "sensitive person," but he's eager to change the subject.

Connell isn't used to having deep conversations, nor is he used to the emotional intimacy that comes along with those conversations. The sense of privacy between him and Marianne is disarming to him, and her directness when she says that she likes him is even more overwhelming. That he gets so flustered when she says that she likes him indicates that he's quite shy. Moreover, his discomfort around having such a frank conversation with Marianne highlights how hard it is for him to reach a place of emotional clarity—unlike Marianne, who doesn't mind speaking her feelings in this moment, he remains guarded and reserved.



2. THREE WEEKS LATER (FEBRUARY 2011)

Marianne prepares to go out. As she puts on some lip balm, her brother, Alan, approaches and asks where she's going. He becomes aggressive in his questioning, suspicious of her because he knows she has no friends and therefore doesn't usually have anywhere to go. She tries to ignore him, smiling when she can, but then he asks if she's *happy* that she has no friends. Just as she tries to leave, he grabs her arm and yanks her backward. Letting go, he tells her not to talk to their mother about how he grabbed her. She says she won't and then slips outside.

It becomes clear at the beginning of this chapter that Marianne's brother, Alan, is abusive toward her. Even though her family is wealthy, then, it's obvious that her home life is difficult and painful. What's more, because of Alan's aggression, she has to face animosity and hostility not just in school, but also in the privacy of her own home. She's therefore forced to lead a very lonely, isolated life in which she has nobody to turn to for support.



As she walks outside, Marianne thinks about a soccer game the entire school was forced to attend the previous term. She doesn't care about that sort of thing, but it was a beautiful day and she found herself watching Connell on the field—she loved studying him from a distance and fantasized about telling him later that she was watching him and, in doing so, prompting him to call her “weird.” She also suddenly yearned to see him having sex. It didn't have to be with her, she just wanted to watch him, though she knew that thinking this way is why people think she's odd.

Everyone around Marianne seems to like school, but she hates it. She doesn't feel like school is her real life, though she doesn't know what “real life” will feel like, either—whenever it starts happening, she reasons, she won't have to keep fantasizing about what it's like. To her, school seems boring, and it's especially ridiculous that she has to dress in a uniform and follow ridiculous rules. Once, her history teacher told her to pay attention, saying that she couldn't learn while staring out the window, and she said, “Don't delude yourself, I have nothing to learn from you.”

Ever since Marianne told Connell that she liked him, he has been coming to the house more often, arriving early to pick up Lorraine. They usually talk about books and joke with each other, though he's still pretty shy. One day, Connell said he liked hearing her opinions, and when she suggested that he probably heard enough of them in school, he said that she acts differently when she's not in school. But she doesn't feel like she has access to multiple identities. She has tried to be a different person before, but it never works. If she's any different in front of Connell, it's just because of their relational dynamic.

Once, Marianne asked Connell about his friends. They don't like talking about things like literature, but that doesn't bother him. Instead, they boast about having sex, and though Connell doesn't particularly like that, he's able to overlook it. Connell then changed the subject by asking Marianne what she meant the other day when she said that she liked him—did she mean as a friend or as something more? Something more, she told him. He then admitted to not knowing how he should feel. If anything happened between them, it might be awkward at school. But Marianne assured him nobody would find out, at which point he looked up at her and they kissed.

Unlike Connell, Marianne isn't confused about her feelings. Rather, she knows she has romantic feelings for him and isn't afraid to admit this to herself. However, the idea of actually being with him in a sexual way seems like such a remote possibility that she doesn't even fantasize about having sex with him, instead simply thinking about how pleasant it would be for her to see him have sex. Although she's honest with herself about how she feels, then, her attraction to Connell still feels distant and removed from her actual life. Furthermore, her sense that she's “weird” for thinking about him in this way suggests that she has internalized the mean things other people say about her, letting their insults degrade her self-esteem.



Compared to Connell, Marianne is surprisingly willing to speak her mind. It's possible that she's combative in class because she has nothing to lose—everyone in her secondary school (which is what Irish people call high school) already dislikes her. Plus, her only social capital is that she's incredibly smart, so she leans into that identity by suggesting that her history teacher isn't intelligent enough to teach her anything.



Connell and Marianne's relationship gets a bit more serious after she tells him that she likes him. Although he hasn't articulated that he, too, is fond of her, his actions make it quite clear that he wants to be around her as much as possible—except, of course, when they're in school. When he tells her that she acts differently in school, it's possible that he's really just trying to convince himself that she's different, which might make him feel better about ignoring her in public.



Connell seems relatively unbothered that he has trouble relating to the people he hangs out with at school, probably because he prioritizes popularity over all else. As a result, he's willing to sacrifice things like emotional connection. At the same time, though, he clearly yearns for genuine connection, which is why can't help himself from seeking it out with Marianne, despite his misgivings about becoming romantically involved with the least popular girl in school. When Marianne assures him that she won't tell anyone at school about their relationship, he finally gives into his emotions, ignoring how unfair and hurtful it is of him to ask her to stay quiet simply because she might tarnish his reputation.



It was Marianne's first kiss. She laughed, and when Connell realized she wasn't laughing at him, he did too. Before leaving, he asked her not to tell anyone, and she said she wouldn't. When she watched him in class the next day, it was like nothing had happened at all—he never glanced her way.

Connell didn't come to Marianne's house for several days after they kissed. When he finally arrived early to pick up Lorraine one day, Marianne let him in and then went upstairs, too embarrassed to face him. But then he knocked on her door. He was worried she might be mad at him, but she wasn't. They kissed again. He slid his hand under her shirt and then under her bra. She asked if they could get naked, but he stopped and said they couldn't: his mother was just downstairs.

Now, after having escaped Alan and his domineering ways, Marianne arrives at Connell's house. It's small and has a yard made of concrete. Her legs and underarms are smooth, and she's wearing deodorant. When he lets her inside, he looks around to make sure nobody has seen them.

It's easy enough for Marianne to agree not to tell anyone about kissing Connell, but it's harder (emotionally speaking) for her to watch him pretend like he doesn't even know her in school. By completely ignoring her in public, he emphasizes his unwillingness to risk his reputation by openly dating her—something that is obviously hurtful, no matter how much Marianne is willing to degrade her sense of self-worth for his benefit.



The pause in Marianne and Connell's secret relationship hints at Connell's continued feeling of emotional confusion surrounding their connection. Although it's clear that he wants to be with her in a romantic way, he seems to have kept himself from going to her house for a few days after actually kissing her, most likely because he thinks he shouldn't be sneaking around with the most unpopular girl in school. But his feelings for Marianne beat out his reservations, suggesting that their connection is too strong to ignore.



The chapter began with Marianne setting out for an unknown destination, and then it provided some backstory. Now, the chapter ends by picking up the narrative thread, as readers learn that Marianne is on her way to Connell's house. Most of the chapters in Normal People are arranged in this fashion, which makes it possible for the novel to maintain the urgency of the present action while also adding the depth and nuance that comes along with the passage of time. On another note, the fact that Marianne's legs are smooth suggests that the petty rumors about her in school—like the one claiming that she doesn't shave her legs—are untrue. Alternatively, it's possible that this is the first time she has shaved her legs, perhaps because it's the first time she has become physically intimate with someone (though it seems unlikely that Connell would care either way).



3. ONE MONTH LATER (MARCH 2011)

Connell and Marianne lounge in bed with their computers. They're trying to decide what fields of study they should apply for in their college applications. Marianne has decided to apply to Trinity College in Dublin, where she wants to study History and Politics. But Connell isn't so sure. At first, he puts down Law, but he can't envision himself as a lawyer, so Marianne urges him to study the only thing he's really interested in: English. He worries about not finding a good job with an English degree, but Marianne still encourages him. "The economy's fucked anyway," she says.

Marianne slept at Connell's house after the first time they had sex. She'd never done it before, but Connell had already slept with a few people. But these past experiences were uncomfortable for him, largely because he knew his sex partners would tell everyone about it the next day—he often had to listen to other people at school narrating his sex life to him later on, which always made him deeply uncomfortable. With Marianne, though, it wasn't like that. He knew she wouldn't tell anyone. Having thoroughly enjoyed himself, he kissed her goodbye the following morning and put the bedsheets in the washing machine before his mother came home. But when Lorraine returned, she saw the sheets in the machine and knew what had happened. Laughing, she simply told Connell to use protection.

In school that week, Connell's friend Rob asked him what it was like for his mother to clean Marianne's house. He wanted to know if Connell ever went into Marianne's and if she treated him like her butler. Connell avoided the questions as much as possible, but the conversation made him feel weird about sleeping with Marianne. He told himself he would break it off with her, but he knew he wouldn't. By that afternoon, he couldn't stop thinking about her, so he drove to her house, where they had sex in her bedroom. Relaxing into her touch, he understood for the first time why people go to such great lengths for sexual pleasure.

When considering Marianne and Connell's relationship, it's helpful to remember that they are, in many ways, growing up together. They meet in a transitional period in their lives, just before they enter the wider world as adults. Their relationship therefore has the naiveté of first love and the emotional intensity of an adult connection. As they discuss what Connell should study, it becomes clear that Marianne wants to support him and help him find happiness. When she tells him not to worry about his job prospects, she reveals both her desire for him to do what he loves and her naiveté when it comes to financial matters—as a wealthy person, she doesn't have to worry about such things, but that's not necessarily the case for Connell.



For somebody as shy as Connell, it would obviously be horrifying to know that everyone in school knew the intimate details of a sexual encounter. Accordingly, sleeping with Marianne is a rewardingly private experience, since Connell knows people won't come up to him at school and make jokes about what they've heard. Privacy, then, is a prerequisite for Connell to truly open himself up to real emotional intimacy—and although his and Marianne's relationship has some clear flaws because it's shrouded in secrecy, it's nothing if not private, allowing him to embrace what it feels like to have an authentic romantic connection.



Connell still doesn't feel comfortable with the idea of dating Marianne, but he does relish the relationship itself. Still, he doesn't like hearing Rob talk about Marianne, especially because Rob emphasizes the fact that she's rich, thus stressing the class differences between them. Although he and Marianne are happy together, then, there are several factors working against them: Connell's obsession with popularity and their contrasting economic backgrounds, both of which infuse the relationship with an unspoken tension.



After having sex with Connell, Marianne told him that she liked him a lot—a compliment that made him strangely sad, but in a good way. He sometimes gets like this, feeling a sense of perplexing sorrow. In this case, he saw that Marianne lived a life free of concern about what other people think of her. He, on the other hand, was stuck constantly worrying about how others perceive him. He has tried writing about Marianne to figure out how he feels about her. He likes trying to articulate who she is and how she acts, but he's always embarrassed about what he's written.

Back in the present, Marianne and Connell are still lounging in bed and filling out college applications. Marianne encourages him not only to study English, but to do so at Trinity in Dublin. He knows that going to Trinity would take him down an unforeseen path. Sometimes he feels like there are two versions of himself, and though he doesn't know which of those versions to be, he understands that soon he'll have to commit to one. If he goes to college in Galway, he'll more or less keep his current life. He'll hang out with the same friends and generally lead the existence he's always assumed he'd lead. But if he goes to Dublin, he'll have an entirely different life—a more cultured life in which he would have sex with interesting people and talk about literature.

Connell wonders what the people he's close to would think if he went to school in Dublin. He knows he'd hardly ever come home to Carricklea if he went to Trinity. Some of his friends would hold that against him, but his mother wouldn't mind—Lorraine would just want him to be happy. He jokes to Marianne that if they both went to Trinity, she'd probably pretend she didn't know him. She's quiet for a moment, and then she says she would *never* pretend she doesn't know him.

Connell very much lives inside his own head. Unlike Marianne, who's capable of living life on her own terms, Connell tries to adjust his life to other people's expectations. As such, he finds Marianne's independence remarkable but also completely inscrutable, which is why he tries to write about her, hoping to gain a better understanding of not just her, but of their relationship, too.



*Connell's thoughts about the future highlight once again that *Normal People* isn't just about a complicated romantic relationship, but also about growing up. The decision Connell has to make about college has extra importance because he approaches it as if it will dictate his future identity. For him, it's not just a choice between two schools but a choice between two sides of his personality. On the one hand, he could stay home and remain more or less the person he is right now, or at least the person he is when he's around his friends. On the other hand, he could go to Trinity and be a different kind of person—the kind of person he is when he's around Marianne.*



As Connell considers what his life would be like if he went to college in Dublin, he feels self-conscious about what his friends might think. Once again, he bases his decisions on how other people might perceive him. When he jokes that Marianne would pretend not to know him in Dublin, he subtly implies that he might not fit in at a prestigious school like Trinity, perhaps because he comes from a modest, working-class background. But when he makes this joke, he seems to forget what he's saying, accidentally bringing up the fact that he's the one who pretends not to know Marianne. When Marianne replies by saying she'd never do the same thing to him, it's both a testament to her kindness and a moment of reproach, in which she implies that, although she agrees to go along with their secret relationship, his refusal to acknowledge his affection for her is quite hurtful.



Connell reflects on the fact that he pretends he doesn't know Marianne when they're at school. He doesn't want his private and public lives to collide. But he also feels awkward about the direction that his conversation with Marianne has taken. He tells her that he'll apply for English at Trinity. She smiles, and suddenly he feels like he might actually be able to keep his two lives going at the same time—he might be able to have one life in which he acts like he always does with his friends in Carricklea, and another life in which he goes to Trinity with Marianne. But he knows that, as soon as he meets Marianne's smiling gaze, he won't believe this anymore.

Connell doesn't want to merge his two lives because he's afraid of what might happen to both sides of his current existence. On the one hand, his life as a popular boy in secondary school might be ruined if people find out that he's involved with Marianne. On the other hand, his relationship with Marianne also might be ruined if his friends make fun of them for secretly seeing each other. Not wanting to lose both, he fantasizes about somehow keeping the disparate parts of his life from merging, but in order to keep them from colliding, it's obvious that he'll have to make a decision at some point—in fact, he already has made a decision by deciding to go to Trinity with Marianne, though he doesn't necessarily see it that way yet.



4. SIX WEEKS LATER (APRIL 2011)

Marianne was voted onto a school committee to fundraise for the “Debs” (a yearly dance)—she thinks it was probably just a joke to vote her onto it, but she still has to help plan. She works on the committee with a group of popular girls, all of whom are in Connell's friend group. Tonight, they've put together a party at a local club to raise money for the Debs. Marianne is dressed up nicely. Karen compliments her, but Rachel doesn't say anything. Rachel is the most popular girl in school and has no interest in making Marianne feel welcome. Marianne, for her part, doesn't care much about popularity, often feeling completely detached from the entire social hierarchy.

Marianne is well aware of her own lack of social status in school, but it doesn't seem to bother her all that much. Or, if it does bother her, she doesn't dwell on it. Instead, she divests herself from the entire idea of popularity. By not playing into the various hierarchies at school, then, she's better able to deal with the fact that she's widely disliked, telling herself it doesn't matter. And yet, there's no doubt that it must still be painful and awkward for her to face animosity and ridicule on a daily basis.



Marianne gets a drink even though she doesn't usually have alcohol, and the girls stand around waiting for people to arrive. Rachel says she'll kill Connell if he and his friends don't show up—he specifically told her they'd be there. Marianne knows that Rachel often talks about Connell this way, as if they have a shared intimacy. Connell himself doesn't pay any mind to it, though he also ignores it when Marianne brings up Rachel's interest in him whenever they're alone.

The tricky thing about Marianne and Connell's arrangement is that it's unclear what, exactly, they are to each other. Because they only see each other secretly, they haven't had to define their relationship to other people. The result is that they've never discussed whether or not they're exclusive with one another. In fact, they haven't laid the important groundwork for smooth and effective conversation on which most successful relationships are built. Therefore, Marianne fails to make it clear to Connell that she dislikes the way Rachel acts toward him, and he fails to pick up on the fact that it bothers her.



Slipping out her phone, Marianne texts Connell and asks where he and the others are. He replies by saying that they're late because one of them threw up from drinking, but now they're on their way. She'd like nothing more than to tell Rachel and the others that the boys will be there soon. Just saying it would suddenly imbue her with a sense of power and status, but she remains silent.

Although Marianne supposedly sees herself as detached from the social hierarchies at school, her desire to tell Rachel and the others that Connell is on his way suggests otherwise. She recognizes that her relationship with Connell might elevate her status, and she can't help but get a little thrill from such an idea—even if she knows she'd never actually say anything about their secret connection.



Marianne hasn't been out drinking in Carricklea before. In fact, she hasn't been to most of the places Connell frequents, and she doesn't know which families are considered "good" and which ones aren't—though she *does* know that she's from a "good" family and Connell isn't. Lorraine got pregnant at 17, and one of her brothers is in prison. But Connell is his own person: quiet, intelligent, and dedicated. He doesn't get into fights or act crazy like some other boys, though he does party with his friends. They sometimes go to a place they call "the ghost," which is a large housing development that nobody lives in. Connell once said he "wished" he could take Marianne to see it but couldn't because there were always people hanging out there.

Connell often talks about things he "wishes" he could do with Marianne, failing to acknowledge that he *could* do these things if he really wanted to. Still, he ended up taking her to "the ghost," leaving her in the car for a moment to make sure nobody was around. When he confirmed that the coast was clear, she came out. There was a disgusting old mattress in one of the rooms, and Marianne asked Connell if he'd ever had sex on it. He hadn't, and he didn't like the implication that he was constantly having sex with other people—is that what Marianne thought he did every weekend? She admitted that she *did* kind of think he spent his time with other girls on the weekends, but he assured her that he's not interested in doing that.

Standing close to Connell, Marianne asked if he would have sex with her right there at "the ghost" if she asked him to. He considered it and then said he would, since she can always get him to do crazy things—a comment that surprised her, since she doesn't think she can *make* him do anything. She wondered aloud if he wanted her to stop *making* him do things and instead leave him alone. He got nervous when she talked like this, and his nervousness made him seem nonchalant, which upset Marianne and made her think he was uninterested in her. But he promised her that he was just feeling "insecure," eventually saying he would be quite unhappy if they stopped seeing each other.

In the small, fictional town of Carricklea, reputation is seemingly quite important—not to Marianne, necessarily, but to other people. Wealth plays a big role in whether or not a family is considered "good," but there are also other factors, like whether or not the parents follow certain social conventions. Because Lorraine got pregnant before she was married, it seems, Connell's family is viewed as something of a disgrace. But he still excels in school and behaves well, illustrating that things like social status are ultimately quite arbitrary and aren't accurate indicators of a person's true identity.



Marianne asks Connell questions about other girls not because she's paranoid or territorial, but because they haven't defined the nature of their relationship. They don't know whether or not they're exclusive with one another, and since Connell wants to keep it a secret that he and Marianne are romantically involved, it's only reasonable for her to wonder if he's also secretly seeing other people.



Because of their lack of communication, Marianne worries that Connell doesn't even like her all that much. But she's wrong: he likes her so much that he gets almost defensive when she talks about the possibility of them not being together anymore. The problem is that they both make assumptions about how the other one feels—Connell seems to assume that Marianne knows he likes her a lot (even though he hasn't necessarily communicated this), and Marianne assumes that he sees their relationship as nothing special. If they clearly articulated their feelings, they would avoid such emotionally confusing interactions. Instead, they both inaccurately guess how the other feels, saying not what they feel, but what they think the other person wants to hear.



Marianne told Connell that his friend Eric called her “flat-chested” at school that day. He said it in front of a bunch of people. Connell told her that the only reason Eric said such a thing was because he probably likes her but knows he has no chance. Connell then said that he likes the way she looks and that he would miss sleeping with her if they were to stop seeing each other. Then they held each other close, and Marianne felt a deep sense of happiness.

In the present again, Connell and the other boys finally come to the club for the fundraising event. Marianne has had three drinks by now and tries to make eye contact with Connell, whose clothes are a lot less fancy than his friends’. He doesn’t look at Marianne, but Eric notices her and tells her she’s wearing a sexy dress. Rachel laughs and goes to whisper something in Connell’s ear, but he looks away and doesn’t laugh. Then Karen suggests that she and Marianne go to the dance floor, and though Marianne is still holding a book of raffle tickets, she drunkenly moves to the music and enjoys dancing with Karen, who tells her not to pay any mind to Rachel.

Marianne dances with Karen and eventually sees that Connell is watching—something Karen has also noticed. “Now you see why Rachel’s in a bad mood with you,” she says. Not much later, Rachel comes over and pulls Marianne from the dance floor to sell raffle tickets.

At the raffle table, Marianne watches a group of men approach. They’re not supposed to be there, since it’s a school fundraiser, but they seem to know Eric and the other boys. One of them sets eyes on Marianne and asks if he can buy her a drink, and when she declines, he puts his arm around her. She tells him to let her go, but he doesn’t, and then he slips a hand beneath her dress and squeezes one of her breasts—hard. Marianne rips herself away and walks into a nearby hall, the door shutting behind her. Drunk and disoriented, she slumps to the floor. Karen, Eric, Rachel, and Connell soon run after her, and though Karen kneels down and asks if she’s all right, Eric and Rachel act like she’s overreacting.

Finally, Connell manages to articulate his feelings by straightforwardly saying that he would be sad if he and Marianne ended their relationship. She has been waiting to hear him clarify his feelings in this way, but it has taken him the entire conversation to do so. And though their emotional confusion in this moment ultimately passes, it’s clear that their ineffective communication style will make their relationship quite difficult to navigate when they encounter more nuanced and complex relational challenges.



The difference in Connell’s clothing highlights that he’s from a working-class background. The fact that his clothes are unlike the ones his friends are wearing also clarifies that he doesn’t just experience a sense of class disparity in his relationship with Marianne; he also experiences it in relation to his friends at school. The main reason he isn’t comfortable with jeopardizing his popularity by revealing his relationship with Marianne is that he’s shy, but it’s also reasonable to speculate that his modest economic upbringing has something to do with his hesitancy, since he is—in some regards—out of place among his wealthier friends. And yet, he has still managed to fit in at school, which is possibly why he’s hesitant to do anything that might endanger his social status—like, for instance, publicly date the least popular person in school.



The secrecy surrounding Connell and Marianne’s relationship has some unexpected outcomes. Rachel, for instance, can clearly sense that Connell has a soft spot for Marianne, but because it hasn’t been made clear that they’re together, there’s nothing stopping her from trying to interfere with their bond. And the way Rachel interferes, of course, is by treating Marianne unkindly. Once again, then, Connell’s refusal to go public about their relationship negatively impacts Marianne.



The entire ordeal with the man who assaults Marianne tests Connell’s decision to keep his feelings for her secret. Since he feels so strongly for her, it’s unlikely that he’s able to write off the man’s atrocious behavior as easily as Eric and Rachel do. But standing up for Marianne would mean revealing—or, at the very least, hinting at—the fact that he likes her.



Eric claims that the man who grabbed Marianne's breast is actually a good guy, and Rachel claims that everyone was laughing at the time. Finally, Connell speaks up and says that he wasn't laughing. He asks Marianne if she's feeling all right, and his attentiveness enrages Rachel, whom he tells to "fuck off." Stunned, Rachel storms off, and then Connell offers to drive Marianne home.

In the car, Connell asks if Marianne wants to come over. His mother might be home, but she won't care—Lorraine doesn't mind that sort of thing. Marianne realizes that he doesn't mind if Lorraine knows about them. Thinking about Lorraine, Marianne says she must be proud of how Connell turned out: he's kind and everyone likes him. Lorraine herself is asleep when they get to Connell's house, so they go into his room and lie together. Connell calls her beautiful, and it makes her feel incredible; nobody has ever called her beautiful before.

Connell gently touches Marianne's breast—where the man grabbed her—and asks if she's all right. She says she is and then asks if he would ever hit a girl. He's taken aback: of course he wouldn't. Marianne then reveals that her father used to hit her mother and even used to hit *her* sometimes, too. Connell is quiet for a long time. He then kisses her on the forehead and promises that he'd never hurt her. He also says she makes him happy and that he loves her—and he's not just saying that to make her feel good, he says. He really loves her. Marianne is overwhelmed; she has never felt lovable, but now she feels different. Everything has changed, and she'll always remember this instant as the moment her life truly began.

For the first time since they started their secret relationship, Connell stands up for Marianne in public. What's more, he actively criticizes Rachel for being so unkind, thus alienating the most popular girl in school in order to support the least popular girl in school.



Connell and Marianne's relationship becomes a bit more emotionally involved at this point, since Connell has demonstrated that he cares about Marianne enough to stand up for her in public. At the same time, though, showing her compassion after she's been physically assaulted isn't all that remarkable—in fact, it's arguable that he really only did the bare minimum by reacting to the situation the way he did. Even so, nobody ever stands up for Marianne, so it's especially significant that Connell, who has never even acknowledged her in public, advocated for her in front of his popular friends.



There's a lot going on in this scene. First of all, it's revealed that Marianne's late father was physically abusive. Given that her brother, Alan, forcefully grabbed her wrist not long ago, it seems likely that Marianne still deals with physical abuse, which makes the incident with the drunk man at the bar much more emotionally fraught, since it builds on a very unpleasant aspect of her life. Perhaps because he's overwhelmed by what Marianne has just told him, Connell can't hold back his feelings and says that he loves her. Although he claims that he's not just saying this to please her, the timing does seem strange, as if he wants to say anything he can to make her feel better; and, to be fair, it does make her feel better. She even feels like this moment is when her life truly begins, underscoring the extent to which she is invested in her relationship with Connell—she cares so much about him that, although she suspects she's unlovable, the mere idea of him loving her feels like a life-changing event.



5. TWO DAYS LATER (APRIL 2011)

Connell isn't sure how he feels. He didn't think before telling Marianne that he loved her—he just said it. Now he doesn't know if it's true, though it is the case that he can't stop thinking about her. He thinks in particular about her telling him that he's kind and that everyone likes him. He enjoys that she thinks he turned out well, and he finds himself wanting to repeat the idea to Lorraine, though he doesn't know why. Nonetheless, he's unsure if he actually loves Marianne. He wishes he could somehow find out how other people lead their internal, emotional lives and then just copy them.

The night Connell told Marianne that he loved her, she fell asleep in his bed. They didn't wake up until they heard Lorraine downstairs. Marianne scrambled and made her way to the front door, apologizing to Lorraine on her way, though Lorraine didn't actually care—she just laughed at Connell once Marianne had left. She told him that she really likes Marianne and that they don't have to keep sneaking around. In fact, she already had a sense that something was going on between them. But Connell rejected the idea that Marianne is his girlfriend. When Lorraine tried to discern what, exactly, they are to each other, Connell tried to avoid the question.

Lorraine asked if Connell is hesitant to call Marianne his girlfriend because he's afraid that Denise—Marianne's mother—would look down on him. Connell was caught off guard, but Lorraine admitted that Denise probably *would* look down on him. Connell hated this idea and tried to laugh it off, though it obviously bothered him. Still dodging Lorraine's questions, he made her promise not to tell anyone that he and Marianne are sleeping with each other. Lorraine was hesitant at first, but he eventually convinced her by insisting that it would make things very hard for him—and Marianne, he claimed—if word got out.

Once again, Connell lacks a sense of emotional clarity. Even though he told Marianne that he loves her, he can't help but second-guess himself. It's possible that he only expressed his love for her because he wanted to make her feel better. It's also possible, though, that he really does love her and that he simply wasn't prepared to say so. Either way, it's evident that the conversation they had in his bed that night was quite intense, suggesting that he was most likely overwhelmed by their staggering emotional intimacy—a closeness that ultimately made it hard for him to sort out his feelings.



Lorraine has no problem with Connell sleeping with Marianne, as long as they practice safe sex. What does seem to give her pause, though, is Connell's strange inability to call Marianne his girlfriend. Whereas Connell doesn't mind letting his relationship with Marianne remain vague and undefined, Lorraine seems to sense that the lack of clarity might lead to trouble.



Lorraine touches on an unspoken tension in Connell and Marianne's relationship: namely, that Marianne comes from a wealthy family and Connell comes from a working-class family. Even though they don't seem to talk about money very much, Connell's obvious discomfort when Lorraine brings this up suggests that he doesn't like the thought that Denise might see their family as better than his own.



The next day, Connell went to school and listened to his friends Rob and Eric tease him about taking Marianne home from the fundraiser. They asked if anything happened between them, but Connell tried to ignore them. Still, they insisted that he must have secretly slept with her, noting that they wouldn't blame him—she's actually attractive, they said, when she "makes an effort," though they still think she's "mentally deranged." Some of the girls in their group weakly stood up for Marianne, saying that Rob and Eric were being mean, but the boys didn't listen. Instead, they jokingly suggested that Connell should take Marianne to the Debs, and everyone burst into laughter.

Even though Connell stood up for Marianne at the fundraiser, he's still unable—or, more accurately, unwilling—to publicly acknowledge their relationship. Rob and Eric's taunting only exacerbates the issue, making it that much harder for Connell to wrap his head around finally being honest about his feelings for Marianne. The way Rob and Eric mock him makes it seem like he would lose face with his friends. At the same time, though, it also seems like Rob and Eric are just giving him a hard time. They would probably find something to joke about even if Connell had nothing to do with Marianne, but Connell is so afraid of losing his social status that he doesn't recognize the difference between playful (albeit mean-spirited) teasing and genuine animosity.



It has been two days since Connell told Marianne he loves her. Driving in the car with Lorraine, he says that he asked Rachel to go to the Debs with him. They're speeding along the road, but Lorraine quickly tells Connell to pull off to the side. When he does, she looks at him and asks who Marianne's going to the Debs with. Connell is confused about why Lorraine wanted him to stop so they could have this conversation, but it soon becomes clear that she's enraged that he didn't ask Marianne to the dance. She accuses him of simply "using" Marianne for sex, and then she calls Connell a "disgrace." She decides to take the bus home because she doesn't want to stay in the car—she might say something she won't be able to take back.

Connell's decision to take Rachel to the dance instead of Marianne is selfish and unfair. He recently told Marianne that he loves her, but he's still unwilling to publicly acknowledge their relationship. As a result, it really does look like he's just "using" Marianne without caring about her feelings. But Connell doesn't think of it this way, apparently thinking it's no big deal for him to go to the Debs with Rachel, who—to make matters worse—is outwardly hostile toward Marianne. Of course, Lorraine recognizes just how insensitive her son's behavior is, which is why she boldly renounces his decision, clearly trying to teach him that it's not acceptable to treat people so carelessly.



6. FOUR MONTHS LATER (AUGUST 2011)

Marianne sunbathes in the garden at her house while her brother, Alan, yells out what other people got on their Leaving Cert. She hasn't eaten much today—like most days recently—and she can't be bothered with Alan's reports about her classmates' scores. Still, he shouts out to her while he's on the phone with some of her classmates: he just heard that somebody received a 600. Alan says into the phone that Marianne must be jealous, since she got a 590. He then calls out that the person who got the 600 was Connell. He asks the person on the phone to put Connell on, and then he chats with him as if he knows him, though he doesn't.

*The "Leaving Cert" is what students in Ireland call the Leaving Certificate Examination, which is the last exam students take in secondary school before going to university. The exams largely determine what universities students are qualified to attend. When *Normal People* was published, 600 was the highest score a person could receive. It's therefore a huge accomplishment that Marianne scored a 590, not to mention the fact that Connell scored a 600. The way Alan talks about scores suggests there's a certain amount of social status attached to impressive results, but Marianne never actually benefited from her intelligence while she was in school. To that end, Connell's popularity had seemingly nothing to do with his intelligence, indicating that their secondary school wasn't a place that encouraged people to be studious.*



As a joke, Alan asks Connell if he wants to talk to Marianne, thinking he'll say no because Marianne doesn't have any friends. To his surprise, though, Connell says yes, but Marianne refuses to take the phone. Alan thrusts it at her, pushing it hard into her chest, so she grabs the phone and ends the call. She then watches Alan standing over her in anger, the sun casting his shadow along the grass.

When Connell told Marianne that he had asked Rachel to the Debs last April, he assured her that he and Rachel weren't romantically involved. She felt humiliated by the entire ordeal, but what was even worse was that he didn't even seem to *understand* that he'd humiliated her—he didn't apologize, instead acting as if it were perfectly reasonable for him to ask someone else to the dance.

Marianne stopped going to school after Connell asked Rachel to the dance. It was pointless anyway: she was better off studying for the Leaving Cert on her own. Plus, she knew nobody would invite her to the Debs, and it was embarrassing to think that she had helped organize it but wouldn't be able to attend. One day she encountered Lorraine in the kitchen. Lorraine said she had heard from Connell that Marianne had been ignoring his calls. For a moment, Marianne felt awkward, but then Lorraine commended her for ignoring Connell—he didn't deserve her, Lorraine said. She also said she had banned him from picking her up from Marianne's house. Standing there in the kitchen, Lorraine hugged her tightly, and Marianne tried to say she was fine.

Still in the garden, Alan stands over Marianne and asks if she's mad that Connell scored better than her on the Leaving Cert. Marianne just laughs at this idea, so Alan asks why she wouldn't talk to Connell. If Alan is so curious, Marianne suggests, he should call Connell back and ask *him*. Alan is confused, but Marianne urges him to call Connell—she'd actually be interested to know what he has to say. They used to be quite close, she tells her brother, but Alan doesn't believe her. All the while, Alan gets angrier and angrier. His arm shakes, and he bites down on one of his knuckles as Marianne speaks. But before he can do anything, their mother comes home.

The fact that Marianne hangs up on Connell hints that they're no longer on good terms. But Alan doesn't even know they were ever involved with each other, so he doesn't understand why Marianne wouldn't want to talk to Connell. As he stands over Marianne, she once again finds herself in a position in which she faces a hostile, possibly violent family member—a reminder of her difficult home life and the fact that, other than Connell (who is seemingly no longer in her life), she has nobody to turn to for support.



Connell underestimates how hurtful it is for him to take Rachel to the dance. His ignorance suggests that he has a hard time putting himself in Marianne's position. Instead of considering how insulting it is for him to keep their relationship a secret, he assumes that Marianne doesn't mind. Worse, he naively thinks that she won't be jealous if he takes Rachel to the Debs, further emphasizing the extent of his insensitivity.



Lorraine doesn't feel obligated to condone Connell's insensitive behavior toward Marianne. Instead, she recognizes that her son treated Marianne unkindly. When she hugs Marianne, she offers a rare moment of emotional support in Marianne's life, which is otherwise full of scorn, emotional abuse, and—thanks to Connell—insensitivity from others.



That Marianne is curious about how Connell would explain himself suggests that they have yet to discuss what happened between them. There is, then, no sense of resolution regarding their relationship. And because it was secret, it's not as if Marianne can emotionally process what happened by talking to somebody about it—indeed, Alan doesn't even believe her when she says that she and Connell used to be close. In other words, she's utterly alone with her own feelings, unable to reach out to anyone for support.



Alan tells Marianne not to say anything about their interaction to their mother. She immediately agrees. It's not as if Denise would do anything anyway—she apparently decided a long time ago not to stop men from mistreating Marianne. But Marianne doesn't dwell on such things. Instead, she focuses on getting out of Carricklea. In less than a month, she'll have disappeared into her new life. At the same time, though, she knows she herself won't be any different. There's no escaping her own life, but at least she can surround herself with new people and immerse herself in new places.

The way Alan treats Marianne in this scene isn't glaringly abusive, but an ominous tension bubbles under the surface of their interaction. When, for example, he forces the phone on her, he jams it into her chest, thus hinting at his willingness to use physical force to get her to listen to him. Their exchange doesn't reach a point of pronounced violence, but it's implied that it most likely would if their mother didn't come home. And yet, even Marianne's mother doesn't support her or protect her from harm. In a way, then, Marianne is tragically accustomed to people not caring about her feelings or her well-being, so Connell's insensitivity simply fits into a larger pattern in her life.



7. THREE MONTHS LATER (NOVEMBER 2011)

Connell goes to a party alone at Trinity College in Dublin. He only knows the person who invited him, Gareth, but he can't find him anywhere, so he wanders through the party feeling awkward. He didn't want to go, but Lorraine urged him on the phone, saying it would be a good opportunity to meet people. Just before Connell is about to leave the party, Gareth comes up and greets him. Connell doesn't particularly like Gareth, who seems a little pretentious and is involved with numerous clubs on campus. Everyone, it seems, knows Gareth and is eager to be in his orbit. Connell has a hard time getting along with people like Gareth, finding that the students at Trinity like to show off their intelligence in intimidating ways.

The fact that Lorraine told Connell that going to the party would be a good way to meet people suggests that he has had a difficult time making friends in college. To that end, he finds the other students intimidating, so it makes sense that he's not having a particularly easy time getting to know them. He is, after all, quite shy. Now that he's removed from the social hierarchies in Carricklea, he experiences what it feels like to not have any friends—he experiences, in other words, a small taste of what Marianne faced in secondary school.



Connell spends a lot of time alone these days. He lives in a small apartment off campus with his roommate Niall. He gets along with Niall, but he doesn't know many other people. Back in Carricklea, it didn't matter that he was shy because everyone already knew him. Now, though, he doesn't know how to present himself to others. He goes home every weekend because he has a job in Carricklea, so he's not used to going out in Dublin. At the party, Gareth is surprised to learn that Connell is from County Sligo, since Gareth's girlfriend is from there, too. Connell doesn't make anything of this coincidence at first, but then Gareth brings him outside and introduces him to his girlfriend. It's Marianne.

Connell's difficulty meeting people in Dublin stands in stark contrast to his popularity in Carricklea. In Carricklea, he was insecure about the idea of losing his popularity, but now he has a much simpler problem: he's having trouble making friends. His difficulty stems from the fact that he's quite shy. He didn't have to establish himself as someone worthy of attention in Carricklea because he had grown up with his friends, so all he had to do was maintain his public image. Now, though, he has to create that public image from scratch—a daunting prospect, even if it also gives him the opportunity to cultivate an identity that actually aligns with his interests.



Too startled to say much, Connell asks Marianne when she started smoking, since she has a cigarette in her hand. Marianne, who is surrounded by friends, ignores his question and explains to everyone that she and Connell went to school together in Carricklea. She then offers to get him a drink, and though he already has a beer, she says she'll get him a glass and tells him to follow her inside. As they leave the others, Marianne tells them over her shoulder that she'll be back in a moment, and from her tone Connell can tell that she's well-liked.

Once alone, Marianne and Connell catch up. They talk about Gareth, laughing about how he's a "campus celebrity." Marianne tells Connell that she's missed him, and he says the same. She then asks if he's still with Rachel, and he tells her that they broke up over the summer. When she says she's sorry to hear this, she almost sounds sincere.

Connell was upset when Marianne left school. Everyone noticed the change in his mood—teachers even talked to him about it, and his guidance counselor said she was worried. To avoid thinking about Marianne's absence, he tried drinking a lot and having sex with other people, but he found these things depressing. Then, in the middle of the summer, he and Rachel started dating. She would talk to him while they got ready to go out with friends, but she'd get mad because he wouldn't listen—and it was true, he didn't listen to her, and he hated himself for that. The problem, though, was that she didn't usually talk about interesting things.

At the Debs, all of Connell's friends got drunk. He was drunk too, but he still looked down on them for being inebriated. At one point Rob showed him and Eric **naked pictures** of his date. Eric laughed, but Connell pointed out that it was a bit "fucked-up" of Rob to show them these photos. Rob got annoyed and made a nasty remark about how Connell had been acting different lately.

Connell and Marianne have, in some ways, switched positions. Unlike in secondary school, Marianne is the popular one now, whereas Connell doesn't have many friends. The situation thus recalls the conversation they had the previous spring, when Connell joked that Marianne would probably pretend not to know him if she saw him on campus at Trinity. Marianne said she would never do such a thing, and now she proves that she was telling the truth by showing him kindness at a party where he otherwise feels completely out of place. In other words, she shows him the compassion that he should have shown her in secondary school.



It's to be expected that Marianne and Connell's first conversation since leaving secondary school would be a little tense—after all, they didn't end on particularly good terms. In fact, it now becomes clear that Connell ended up dating Rachel, despite the fact that he insisted at the time that they were just friends. He therefore validated Marianne's insecurity about him going to the dance with someone else.



Although Connell dated Rachel, it's evident that he didn't do so because he actually had feelings for her. Rather, he was just trying to make himself feel better about losing Marianne. He tried getting drunk and having casual sex as a way of coping, but these things clearly didn't help him, so he turned to Rachel—but that didn't work, either. The unfortunate thing about this attempt to feel better is that he ended up treating yet another romantic partner unfairly, ultimately failing to show Rachel true affection.



The difference between Connell and his group of popular friends becomes quite stark after he no longer has Marianne, who reaffirmed his sense of self (albeit secretly). He and his friends have opposing values, but he has mostly been able to ignore their differences. Now, though, he has felt what it's like to spend time with someone with whom he's truly compatible, so it's harder to overlook the things he doesn't like about his other friends—like, for instance, Rob's willingness to violate his date's privacy in order to look cool in front of Eric and Rob.



Later that night, Connell went outside for a cigarette and Eric followed him out. After a moment, Eric said it was too bad Marianne didn't end up coming to the dance. Connell didn't reply, but then Eric asked him what was happening between them—everyone, it turned out, knew they were together. Connell was mortified, not because it was a big deal that he'd been with Marianne, but because it *wasn't*. They could have dated publicly and nothing major would have happened. Connell left the dance after this conversation, failing to say goodbye to Rachel, who broke up with him not long after the dance. People went off to college, and Connell's life in secondary school—a life that had felt so important at the time—ended just like that.

In the present, Connell and Marianne continue their conversation at the party in Dublin. He admits that he and Rachel weren't suited for each other, and Marianne teases him by saying that she could have told him as much. But she couldn't tell him, Connell points out, since she wasn't responding to his texts at the time. That was just because she felt “abandoned,” she says, but he responds by saying that he *also* felt “abandoned.” He also clarifies that he never was romantic with Rachel until after he and Marianne were together.

Throughout their conversation, Connell feels as if maybe he and Marianne are flirting. They start joking about how it sometimes felt like Connell could read Marianne's mind—when they were having sex, for instance, but also after they'd finished. He says maybe that's just normal. “It's not,” Marianne replies. In the ensuing pause, they both smile. Then Connell tells her that she looks good, and she jokes about how she had to wait until college to become pretty. He disagrees. She was always beautiful, he says. She likes hearing someone say that, she admits, causing Connell to wonder why Gareth never calls her beautiful—maybe he's too busy with the debate team or something.

Marianne asks if Connell's dating anyone. When he says he isn't, she senses that he's having trouble meeting people at Trinity, so she offers to introduce him to some girlfriends—“Yeah, I have those now,” she jokes. But he isn't so sure, saying that maybe he wouldn't be their type. When she asks what's not to like about him, he loses himself in thought. He suddenly wants to apologize for treating her the way he did, but he can't bring himself to do it.

The realization that nobody would have cared if Connell and Marianne dated publicly is devastating to Connell because it highlights the fact that he ruined a promising relationship for no good reason. He treated her unfairly and deprived himself of happiness, all so that he could protect his popularity. But nothing about his social status would have changed if he'd been transparent about his feelings, ultimately highlighting how petty and meaningless his concerns were.



As Connell and Marianne analyze the fallout of their relationship, they avoid talking to each other with outright hostility. Of course, Marianne certainly has a right to be angry at Connell, but she seems willing to move on, making light of the situation by playfully suggesting that she knew all along that Connell and Rachel weren't a good match. When they both say they felt “abandoned” by the other, though, their conversation hints at the deeper, more serious things they felt in the aftermath of their relationship—things they don't want to acknowledge outright but also can't completely ignore.



The conversations that Connell and Marianne have are often playful and indirect while also hinting at their deeper feelings for each other. For instance, Connell's joke about being able to read Marianne's mind turns into something a bit more serious when she suggests that their close connection isn't something that everyone has with their partners. The implication here is that there's something special between them. Despite the intimacy of this implication, though, they shift gears by joking about Gareth again, thus ensuring that their intense bond continues to lurk just beneath the surface of their interactions.



The circumstances surrounding Marianne and Connell's connection have drastically changed. Marianne is now the one with many friends. Unlike Connell in secondary school, though, she's willing to introduce him to her group. It makes sense, then, that her offer would lead Connell to reflect on how poorly he treated her, since she's currently showing him the kindness he should have showed her last year. Because he has trouble articulating his feelings, though, he can't bring himself to apologize for how he behaved.



8. THREE MONTHS LATER (FEBRUARY 2012)

Connell and Marianne are on their way home from a party. They spent the night there, and now Connell's driving them both back. At the party, Marianne wandered into a shed with her friends Peggy and Joanna. She was already quite drunk, but then she drank some more in the shed and listened to Peggy and Joanna talk. Eventually, she drunkenly wondered where Connell was, and Peggy guessed that he must have been upstairs with Teresa, whom he's been seeing lately. Marianne is fine that he and Teresa are together, though she often finds herself trying to get Connell to complain about her.

Conversation in the shed turned to Connell. Joanna said she liked the way he dressed, but Peggy scoffed and spoke condescendingly about his clothes, saying he probably doesn't even own a suit. When Joanna pointed out that her comment was fairly classist, Peggy didn't care. Later, Marianne smoked pot with Peggy and then encountered Connell on the stairs. They were the only two people up on the house's third story. Marianne said she thought Connell was with Teresa, but he pointed out that Teresa wasn't even at the party. She then asked if Connell likes Teresa better than her. When he said no, she asked if Teresa is better in bed. After some initial hesitation, he said she isn't.

Marianne kissed Connell and told him she wanted to have sex, but he wouldn't because she was so drunk. When she asked if that was the only reason he wouldn't sleep with her, he said yes. Then he told her to go to bed, and she asked him to kiss her—he did, but in an innocent, lighthearted way, and then he went downstairs.

Still in the car on the way back from the party, Marianne apologizes for her behavior the previous night. She doesn't want to interfere or make things awkward with Teresa. Connell notes that Teresa isn't his girlfriend, but Marianne still doesn't want to mess anything up with their—her and Connell's—friendship. These days, Connell and Marianne have been hanging out a lot. They like walking through Dublin and chatting, enjoying what it feels like to spend time together in public. Connell sometimes complains about not being able to make friends in Dublin because everyone is so pretentious.

Even though Marianne and Connell reconnected when they arrived at Trinity, they haven't rekindled their romantic relationship. And yet, their feelings for each other clearly lurk in the background of their interactions, which is why Marianne finds herself trying to get Connell to say bad things about Teresa. So although they're technically just friends, it's obvious that their connection is complicated by stronger, deeper emotions.



Peggy's comment openly acknowledges that Connell doesn't come from the same wealthy, upper-class background as many of the other students at Trinity—students like Marianne herself. Given that Connell has had trouble fitting in, it's likely that he's quite aware of the class disparity between him and people like Peggy or Marianne. On another note, the fact that Marianne asks such blunt questions about how Connell sees her in comparison to Teresa highlights the romantic emotions that exist just beneath the surface of their relationship.



Again, Marianne's drunken questions illustrate how she really feels about Connell. And Connell, for his part, clearly still has feelings for Marianne, considering that he says he would have sex with her if she weren't so drunk. Even if he just says this to appease her, the mere fact that he doesn't want to upset her suggests that he really does have strong feelings for her. And yet, they're both apparently unable to be forthright about these feelings in normal circumstances, like when Marianne isn't drunk.



The strange thing about Marianne and Connell's relationship during this period is that they're seemingly willing to indulge their romantic bond but haven't actually started dating. They aren't full-on sleeping with each other, of course, but their emotional connection has all the characteristics of a romantic relationship: they go on long walks, talk a lot, and simply enjoy each other's company. Part of why they enjoy spending time in this capacity might have to do with the fact that they've never been able to be together in public before, due to the secrecy of their relationship in secondary school. There is, then, a liberating feeling that comes along with the time they spend together in Dublin, even if it's restricted by their inability to fully commit to each other as romantic partners.



After hanging out with Marianne's friends one night recently, Connell went back to Marianne's place and slept in her bed. As they lay together, he asked if her friends knew about their history. She said they don't, though some of them may have picked up on it. She would be a little embarrassed if they found out, not just because of the way Connell treated her, but because she went along with it. He slid his hand into hers and apologized for how he behaved, saying he feels guilty—he often has anxiety about social situations, and he thinks maybe that's why he didn't want anyone to find out. But it's no excuse. Marianne squeezed his hand and forgave him, and they fell asleep with their fingers intertwined.

After Connell drives her back from the party, Marianne invites him into her apartment. She showers while he eats some breakfast, and then she comes into the kitchen wearing a robe. She walks to him and stands before his chair. He opens the robe and kisses her, at which point they go to the bedroom. After having sex twice, they lie there and talk about how sex isn't the same with other people, and then Marianne drifts off to sleep.

9. TWO MONTHS LATER (APRIL 2012)

Things are going well between Marianne and Connell. They see each other all the time and have developed a somewhat serious relationship, though it's still a private arrangement. One night, though, they're hanging out with Peggy in Marianne's kitchen when Peggy bluntly asks if they're sleeping together. After a moment, Marianne says they are. Connell smiles but says nothing. Peggy, for her part, says that they make a nice couple, but Marianne corrects her—she didn't say they were a *couple*. Peggy takes this to mean they're in an open relationship. She goes on at length about how all men fantasize about open relationships but don't actually want them when the possibility arises.

Finally, Connell apologizes to Marianne for the way he treated her during secondary school. He's been wanting to apologize for a long time but hasn't found a way to do it. In fact, the only reason he's able to apologize is that it comes up somewhat organically in conversation, thus underscoring how hard he finds it to speak frankly and openly about his emotions—the circumstances, it seems, have to be just right for him to come out of his shell.



In some ways, having sex helps Marianne and Connell act on the romantic feelings that have been lurking beneath the surface of their relationship ever since they reconnected at Trinity. In another sense, though, becoming physically intimate doesn't do much to change their circumstances: they still haven't defined the nature of their relationship. Even if they're ethically okay with having a casual, open relationship, but they haven't even determined that this is what they're doing. As a result, it's quite likely that they'll run into some kind of misunderstanding down the road.



Marianne and Connell aren't used to talking about their relationship with other people. It's a big deal, then, that they tell Peggy that they're together, ultimately ensuring that their relationship won't be shrouded in secrecy like it was in secondary school. And yet, just because they speak openly with Peggy doesn't mean they have a clear sense of what, exactly, they are to each other. When Marianne corrects Peggy by saying that she and Connell aren't a couple, it's unclear what, exactly, her motivations are. Her behavior up until this point would suggest that she would embrace the idea of Connell as her boyfriend, which is why it's surprising that she goes out of her way to suggest that they're not a couple. At the same time, though, she's just being honest: they really aren't a couple, since they haven't defined their relationship. Perhaps thinking that Connell doesn't want to commit to anything serious, then, Marianne downplays their bond.



Connell doesn't want to be in an open relationship, but he doesn't say anything. He knows there are many people who would love to date Marianne. Her male friends are always touching her in front of him. The one time he brought this up, though, she said that just because *he* doesn't touch her in public doesn't mean nobody else can.

Despite their brief argument about other guys touching Marianne, Connell has been enjoying his time with Marianne and has stopped going home on the weekends. He now has a job at a restaurant in Dublin that one of Marianne's friends helped him get, and though he thinks the restaurant might close, he's confident something else will come along—one of Marianne's rich friends will help him find another job; that's just what it's like to know rich people.

Peggy tells Connell and Marianne that she'd be willing to have a threesome with them. Caught completely off guard, Connell is mortified—he doesn't want to have a threesome with Peggy, but he doesn't know how to decline. He knows he could never successfully go through with such an idea. It's *possible* that he could have sex with Peggy while Marianne watched, but there's no way he could ever have sex with Marianne while Peggy watched. Luckily for him, Marianne sees him struggling and interjects, claiming that she's too "self-conscious" to have a threesome. Peggy's surprised to hear her say this but soon drops the subject.

Connell's decision not to say anything when Peggy starts talking about open relationships is perfectly in keeping with his tendency to shy away from articulating his emotions. He doesn't want an open relationship, but he can't bring himself to speak up and actually say that. By remaining silent, though, he makes it that much more likely that the relationship will slip away from him, since Marianne might take his silence to mean that he doesn't want to be exclusive. When she criticizes him for being possessive without actually wanting anyone to know they're dating, Marianne highlights how confusing his hypocrisy feels.



For the first time in his life, Connell feels like he doesn't have to worry all that much about money. He still has to work, of course, but he benefits from existing in Marianne's orbit of rich, privileged friends. However, the fact that he's surrounded by so many wealthy people doesn't just make his life easier, but also emphasizes the class disparity between him and the other students at Trinity.



The bond between Marianne and Connell is so intimate that the mere idea of letting somebody else into their relationship is deeply troubling to Connell. However, he seems to feel a certain social pressure to be interested in having sex with two women at the same time, perhaps because many people—like, for instance, Peggy—assume that all men fantasize about having threesomes. That's not the case for Connell, but he once again struggles to articulate his feelings. The problem, though, is that his inability to speak up for himself puts pressure on Marianne, who confidently steps in and takes the attention away from Connell. The entire interaction illustrates how Connell's shy, uncommunicative ways often put a burden on Marianne. In secondary school, for example, his social anxiety required her to keep their relationship a secret at a high cost to her own self-esteem. And now, in college, his social anxiety forces her to speak self-deprecatingly about herself in front of her friend.



Recently, Marianne went home for a few days. When she came back, she and Connell watched a movie and, after it finished, he noticed she was crying. He was surprised—the movie was sad, but not *that* sad. Because one of the characters in the film had an unplanned pregnancy, he asked Marianne if she was pregnant. She wasn't, but they started talking about what it would be like if she *were* to get pregnant. Lorraine, for her part, would be mad at Connell, though not because she dislikes Marianne. To the contrary, she loves Marianne and thinks she's too good for Connell. When Connell asked what her family would think of him if she got pregnant, she said they don't care what she does.

Connell eventually surmised that Marianne had some sort of fight with her family while she was home. He knew she doesn't get along with them, especially when it comes to her brother, Alan. But Marianne didn't talk about it much after coming back, except to say that her mother and brother don't like her. He assured her that they must love her, but she didn't respond. When they went to bed, he pleased her. Afterwards, she joked about how upset she'll be when he eventually falls in love with someone else, but he told her that he's pretty content with their current arrangement. When they went to sleep, it was clear Marianne was happy again, leading Connell to the realization that he has the power to make her happy even when she's sad.

Finally, Peggy leaves. Still sitting in the kitchen, Connell thanks Marianne for intervening on his behalf—he knows she said she wouldn't have a threesome to put him at ease. When he thanks her, she doesn't make a big deal of it; she wouldn't really enjoy having a threesome anyway, though she would have done it if he'd wanted to. Connell tells her that she shouldn't do things she doesn't want to do, but she shrugs off his comment. Suddenly, he has the overwhelming feeling that he has complete power over her. He could hit her in the face—hard—and she wouldn't do anything. The thought unsettles him and makes him feel sick. Does he want to hit her? Feeling faint, he stands, but when she asks him what's wrong, he says he's fine.

Considering that Connell and Marianne have been romantically involved—at least in some capacity—for a while now, it's surprising that they haven't talked much about her turbulent home life. In fact, Connell doesn't seem to realize the correlation between her sadness in this moment and the fact that she just came back from a visit home, suggesting that, although they're quite close, there's a certain emotional barrier created by their lack of open communication.



Despite their difficulties communicating effectively with one another, Connell and Marianne have a very emotionally intense relationship. Connell seems to recognize this intensity when he realizes that he has the ability to drastically improve her mood—an ability he has likely never had in any of his other relationships. But the way he's able to make Marianne feel better isn't by talking to her or listening to her discuss her emotions. Rather, it's through acts of sexual intimacy. Sex, for that matter, plays a huge role in their relationship, helping them establish a sense of intimacy that often makes up for their lack of effective communication.



Connell's unnerving thoughts in this scene stem from a sense of anxiety surrounding the sheer intensity of his and Marianne's relationship. Whereas he previously took pleasure in the realization that he has the power to change Marianne's mood, he now feels deeply unsettled by just how much she cares about him. At the core of his anxiety is the fear that he's unworthy of Marianne's all-encompassing, unequivocal love. When he asks himself if he wants to hit her, for example, it's not because he actually wants to hurt her, but because he doubts his worthiness of Marianne's trust. He's overwhelmed by the huge role he plays in her life, and his insecurity in this regard illustrates just how emotionally staggering their relationship can feel.



10. THREE MONTHS LATER (JULY 2012)

Marianne walks through the supermarket in Carricklea. She's not grocery shopping, though—going to the store is just something to do. When she goes to pay for a few snacks, she sees Lorraine and Connell. They make small talk, with Connell saying that he didn't know she was in town. He looks bigger and stronger now. As they all turn to leave, Connell and Lorraine insist on giving Marianne a ride home, and then—after dropping Lorraine at home—Connell drives Marianne to her house.

Marianne hasn't seen Connell since May, when he told her that he wanted to see other people. Before that, Connell had asked Marianne to send him **naked pictures** of herself. He promised to delete them, but she didn't understand why he wouldn't want to keep them. He explained that deleting nude photos is the proper thing to do, making it impossible for the photos to make their way to other people. Marianne asked if Connell would send her one in return, and he wondered if she'd really want a picture of his penis. She said she would, but she also said he probably shouldn't send it, since she'd never delete it. He laughed, and she joked that she'd look at it every day until her death.

In the car, Connell and Marianne talk about Jamie, the new guy Marianne has been seeing. When Marianne asks if Connell is seeing anyone, he says he isn't. Back in May, Connell and Marianne went to a friend's pool party at the end of the term. At one point, Connell got out of the pool and sat next to her. He even put his arm around her and kissed her shoulder, a gesture that made her very happy because he doesn't usually show affection. Looking out at their friends, he asked, "Is this what life is like?" She wasn't sure what he meant. He told her a couple days later that he was going home for the summer.

Given that Marianne takes note of the differences in Connell's appearance, it's clear they haven't been seeing each other lately. By foregrounding the chapter with this new sense of unfamiliarity between Marianne and Connell, the novel encourages readers to reflect on how unsteady their relationship is. Indeed, it's evident that Marianne and Connell have a volatile, on-off relationship that is quite difficult to track.



Because the previous chapter ended with Connell feeling unnerved by the intensity of their relationship, it's possible that he ended things with Marianne because their bond felt too overwhelming. To that end, the anecdote about the naked picture illustrates his discomfort with the idea of having too much power in the relationship—he wanted to make sure Marianne knew he would delete the picture, essentially assuring her that he'd never act like Rob, who had no trouble violating his date's privacy at the Debs by showing Eric and Connell a nude photo of her. But Marianne didn't seem to care whether or not he would delete it, a fact that possibly unsettled Connell because it once again suggested that he has an inordinate amount of power in the relationship.



When Connell asks Marianne if this is "what life is like," it's possible that he's struggling with the fact that everyone around him is wealthy and privileged. He didn't have a wealthy upbringing, so going to a pool party with friends from a prestigious school is probably something he never envisioned. In fact, before he met Marianne, he assumed he'd go to college close to home and more or less lead the same life he led in secondary school. Now, though, he has embarked on a much different path—one that feels hard to reconcile with his original vision of what life would be like. Unfortunately for Marianne, though, Connell doesn't articulate any of these thoughts, so she has trouble interpreting what he's feeling.



Connell mentions while driving that Marianne hasn't been responding to his texts. It's true: she's been ignoring him. She'd been embarrassed when she had to tell all her friends that they'd broken up, especially because she'd introduced him to all her friends. Joanna, in particular, was confused by what happened—she asked Marianne to tell her exactly what was said during the breakup, but she still seemed confused about it. She also wanted to know if Connell knew much about Marianne's family life. Joanna herself thought she understood Marianne's family dynamic, but Marianne knew that nobody really understood it; nobody who comes from a loving household could understand, not even Connell.

Slightly offended that Marianne didn't tell him she'd be in town, Connell asks why she's there. It's the anniversary of her father's death, she explains, so she's there for the Mass that will be held for him at the local church. Feeling sorry for not knowing about the Mass, Connell says he'll be there, though Marianne says he doesn't have to come. Still, he insists. She then apologizes for not responding to his texts and invites him inside, but he says he should get home to unload the groceries. The next day, Connell makes eye contact with Marianne at her father's Mass, supporting her from afar, and in this moment she knows they're friends again.

11. SIX WEEKS LATER (SEPTEMBER 2012)

Last spring, Connell had intended to stay in Dublin over the summer. But then the restaurant he was working at went out of business, and it was too late for him to find another job in the city. He knew he wouldn't be able to pay for the room he shared with Niall and that he'd have to move out, but he figured it wouldn't be a big deal—he could just stay with Marianne for the summer. He slept there almost every night anyway. But for some reason, he kept putting off asking her. They never talked about money or about how her family's rich and his isn't.

Joanna seems to sense the lack of clear, effective communication between Connell and Marianne. The fact that she wants Marianne to tell her exactly what was said during the breakup suggests that she wants to help Marianne figure out what went wrong—which, in turn, suggests that Marianne herself must have indicated to Joanna that she didn't understand why Connell broke things off so abruptly. The relationship is thus shrouded in mystery because of Connell and Marianne's struggle to openly communicate.



For all of Connell's flaws as a communicator, he manages to give Marianne the emotional support she needs, at least in this moment. By coming to her father's Mass, he helps her feel less alone. After all, she has a bad relationship with her mother and brother, and she doesn't feel like anyone really understands her home life. Of course, she doesn't think Connell understands her home life, either, but the mere fact that he comes to her father's Mass suggests that he wants to be there for her—a form of support that helps keep their connection alive.



The previous chapter outlined how Marianne perceived her and Connell's breakup—this one outlines Connell's perception of the same thing. It becomes clear that he didn't want to leave Dublin, but that he had trouble working up the nerve to ask Marianne if he could stay with her. Part of his hesitancy has to do with his inability to articulate his feelings, but it also has to do with the class disparity at play in their relationship. Because they never talk about how they're from different economic backgrounds, though, it's even harder for him to bring up the fact that he needs to stay with her out of financial necessity.



The night he and Marianne went to the pool party, nothing felt like “real life” to Connell. He felt like he didn’t really know or identify with anyone around him. But then he kissed Marianne, which made her happy, and he decided he would ask later that night to move in with her for the summer. After the party, though, they had sex and Marianne fell asleep. Time was running out for him to make plans. Two days later, he went to her place and quickly said he had to move out of Niall’s apartment. Her face went expressionless, and then she said, “You’ll be going home, then.” Surprised, he said that was true—he was going home.

Connell didn’t know how he’d lost control of the conversation. He found himself saying that he assumed Marianne would want to see other people, and she said, “Sure.” He only started crying once he’d left her apartment. A few weeks later, Marianne started dating Jamie, a rich kid whose father was involved in creating the financial crisis in Ireland. Connell figured that Marianne had always wanted to see other people and must have been glad he was leaving for the summer—now she could spend her time with rich guys like Jamie.

Now it’s September, and Connell and Marianne are friends again, though she’s still dating Jamie. They meet for coffee in Dublin, and Marianne says she hopes that Jamie and Connell can get to know each other. But she’s worried that Connell will intimidate Jamie, not just because Connell is bigger, but because he used to be with Marianne. During their conversation, Connell can’t help but wonder if they’re supposed to no longer be attracted to each other—he’s still attracted to her and doesn’t know what to do with that fact.

After attending the Mass for Marianne’s father in July, Connell had gone drinking with his friends and encountered Miss Neary, the economics teacher who’d always had a thing for him. He was extremely drunk and found himself in her house, not remembering how, exactly, he got there. She started kissing him. At first, he let it happen, but then he started pulling away—but every time he leaned back, she followed, until he wasn’t even sure which way was up and which was down. He tried to push her off but couldn’t. When she unbuttoned his pants and reached inside, he said he was going to throw up. Finally, she leaned back, giving him an opportunity to stand. He woke up the next day on his own living-room floor.

Once again, Connell’s struggle to clearly talk about his emotions creates trouble in his relationship with Marianne. Instead of simply asking if he can stay with Marianne for the summer, he begins by saying that he has to move out of Niall’s apartment. He most likely hopes that Marianne will respond by immediately saying that he can stay with her, thus helping him avoid asking the question he’s been putting off for so long. But because he doesn’t say anything other than that he needs to move out of Niall’s apartment, Marianne thinks he’s already decided to leave Dublin, and once she voices this assumption, he can’t bring himself to correct her. In a way, they each assume that the other doesn’t want to stay together, and they base their interaction on these assumptions; it’s as if neither of them can bring themselves to show their emotional investment in the relationship.



When Connell asks if Marianne wants to see other people, he’s not saying that this is what he wants—he’s just making an assumption. But Marianne takes his question to mean that he wants to see other people. Therefore, although neither of them wants to see other people, that’s exactly what they end up agreeing on. And once their relationship starts to crumble, Connell’s insecurities creep in, as he tells himself that Marianne probably doesn’t want to be with a working-class person like him anyway.



Even though they’re no longer together in a romantic capacity, Connell and Marianne’s relationship still seems to have hints of attraction—this, at least, is the case for Connell. What’s more, the fact that Marianne is with Jamie possibly confirms Connell’s insecure thought that she would prefer to have a wealthy boyfriend, though Marianne herself has never said or done anything to indicate such a thing.



Needless to say, Miss Neary took advantage of Connell, who was too drunk to give proper sexual consent. What’s more, even in his drunken state he didn’t consent to her sexual advances, but she ignored him until the last minute (and only, it seems, because she didn’t want him to throw up on her). Such an encounter would be deeply troubling and even traumatizing for anyone, let alone someone like Connell, who is sensitive and often has trouble articulating his emotions, making it that much harder for him to assert himself by refusing Miss Neary’s advances.



As they have coffee, Marianne tells Connell that Jamie is a “sadist.” He likes to get rough with her during sex. Connell feels overwhelmed and disoriented when he hears this, but Marianne just tries to laugh about it, though the laugh is unconvincing and wrong. He asks if Marianne likes it when Jamie hits her during sex. She’s not sure, she replies, prompting Connell to ask why she lets it happen. But Marianne says it was her idea in the first place. She doesn’t necessarily like being “degraded,” but she *does* like knowing that she’d be willing to degrade herself for someone else. When she suggested the idea to Jamie, he really went for it, since he likes that sort of thing.

Connell hates hearing that Jamie beats Marianne up during sex. She explains that sometimes Jamie hits her with a belt or chokes her, and though she doesn’t enjoy it, that’s the whole point: she thinks it wouldn’t really be submissive if she *liked* it. She also wonders if maybe she wants to be treated poorly because she thinks she deserves it. Connell is disturbed. When they used to have sex, it was easy and natural, and they’d often fall asleep holding each other. He asks why Marianne didn’t want to have rough sex with him, and she admits it’s because she didn’t *need* to—it was “real” with Connell, so it wasn’t necessary to do anything but have sex. She was already fully under Connell’s power, whereas with Jamie she only pretends to be.

Changing the subject, Marianne asks how Connell has been. He realizes that she actually wants to know. She’s the only person in his life he can speak to openly and honestly, and for this reason he feels as if he genuinely “needs” her. Thinking this way, he starts to tell her about what Miss Neary did to him over the summer.

12. FOUR MONTHS LATER (JANUARY 2013)

Marianne is in her apartment with a bunch of her friends. She has just taken the exams intended to determine who will receive a scholarship. She doesn’t need the money but simply views the scholarship as a way of distinguishing herself and proving her intelligence. She thinks she did pretty well on the exams, but she downplays her performance when her friends ask how things went. Peggy, in particular, makes fun of her by implying that she must have done badly. Peggy has been hanging around a lot recently. She considers herself close to Marianne, but whenever they’re in public, she makes fun of her to get a laugh out of their other friends.

Marianne’s sex life with Jamie plays on everything Connell feared about their own relationship. He felt overwhelmed and even frightened by how willing Marianne was to do whatever he wanted, something that made him feel like he had an uncomfortable amount of power. With Jamie, Marianne seems to re-create this dynamic, though what’s odd is that she doesn’t actually seem to like it all that much—she just likes doing it for Jamie’s sake, perhaps as a way of exhibiting a sense of selflessness in their relationship.



By suggesting that she didn’t need to have rough sex with Connell because she was already under his power, Marianne confirms something that bothered him when they were together: she would gladly do anything he wanted. With Jamie, though, it’s a little different. She doesn’t actually feel like he has any sway over her, so she goes out of her way to prioritize his sexual desires over her own. It’s a complicated matter. The novel doesn’t necessarily condemn sexual kinks having to do with sadism, but it does use Marianne’s willingness to submit to her lovers as a way of hinting at her own insecurities or lack of self-worth. It’s therefore rather troubling that she engages in rough sex without genuinely wanting to.



Even though Marianne and Connell often have trouble effectively communicating their feelings, they’re also extremely close. They can’t always speak with much clarity about their relationship, but they do talk pretty openly about other aspects of their lives, so they’ve come to see each other as sources of emotional support. As such, Connell confides in Marianne about Miss Neary and, in doing so, builds on their close emotional bond.



Unlike her experience in Carriclea, Marianne has a lot of friends at Trinity, but they’re not all as kind or supportive as she might hope. Peggy, for instance, seems to care more about getting a laugh from the rest of their friend group than reassuring Marianne about how she did on the scholarship exams. In a way, Marianne’s popularity in college resembles Connell’s popularity in secondary school: she has a lot of friends but doesn’t necessarily feel particularly connected to them, which is exactly what Connell experienced in Carriclea.



Jamie pipes up and says that one of his professors wanted him to take the scholarship exams. But Jamie decided he couldn't be bothered to study over the winter break. Everyone knows he's lying—the real reason he didn't take the exams was because he knew he wouldn't pass. Marianne feels a deep disrespect for Jamie, but Peggy seems to really like him. Whenever Marianne talks negatively about Jamie, Peggy defends him by suggesting that *all* men are sexist and selfish. In comparison, she claims, Jamie isn't really that bad.

While hanging out with her friends, Marianne receives a call from Connell. He has just been robbed of his wallet and phone. Since he has no way to get home, he's wondering if Marianne could help him. She immediately tells him to take a taxi to her apartment and says she'll pay the fare when he arrives. Jamie watches her as she talks on the phone, even when she motions for everyone to keep talking amongst themselves. She's more than willing to help Connell—when he told her about what happened with Miss Neary over the summer, she was overwhelmed with rage. If Miss Neary ever tried something like that again, Marianne said, she would kill her. Connell had laughed, but Marianne wasn't joking.

Marianne had a terrible time over the winter break. Alan followed her around the house, constantly looking for ways to get into fights. At one point, he criticized her for bragging about her grades to her aunt and uncle at dinner. When she tried to laugh him off, he grabbed her by the arm, whirled her around, and spit in her face. Then, on Christmas day, her mother gave her \$500 and said she was worried about her future—life isn't like it is in college, she said, to which Marianne replied by noting that at least people won't spit in her face in the real world. Her mother hardly batted an eye, simply suggesting that Marianne can't even handle “a little sibling rivalry.”

It's pretty obvious that Jamie is insecure about himself and, as a result, overcompensates for his lack of self-esteem. Marianne seems to recognize that this is the case, but she has nobody to talk to when she wants to complain about Jamie, since Peggy is apparently unwilling to talk badly about him. On the whole, the mere fact that Marianne disrespects Jamie suggests that she's unhappy in their relationship. It also sheds light on why she has rough sex with him even though she doesn't necessarily like it when he becomes physical with her—she's trying to make up for the fact that she sees him as pathetic by letting him assume a position of dominance in their relationship.



Because they have such an emotionally important history together, Marianne feels protective of Connell. She wants to do whatever she can to help him, even if that means inadvertently revealing to Jamie how much she cares about Connell. Similarly, she can't bear the thought of Miss Neary taking advantage of him.



Everything about Marianne's home life is emotionally toxic. Alan abuses her both verbally and physically. Meanwhile, her mother purposefully looks the other way and, to make matters worse, belittles Marianne when she tries to stand up for herself. The hostility of her family life is likely why she feels unworthy of love, since the people who are supposed to be closest to her have never shown her any form of genuine love or support.



Connell has blood on his face and a cut in his lip when he arrives at Marianne's apartment. She meets him on the front steps, and he takes her hand in his own. He's very drunk—so drunk that he starts flirting with her, but she tells him that Jamie is there. Inside, her friends are surprised to see Connell's wounds. After he tells them about the mugging, Jamie speaks derisively about drug addicts, but Connell challenges him by showing sympathy for people who are so desperate for cash. Before long, Jamie announces that he'll have to leave soon, and instead of telling him to stay, Marianne says she'll see him tomorrow.

After everyone leaves Marianne's apartment, Connell jokingly reminds her that she could have another, better boyfriend, since everyone likes her so much. As they talk, she feels comforted by the alone time with Connell, which suddenly relaxes her and makes her feel like life is all right. But then he tells her that he's been seeing someone—he should have told her earlier, he admits, but he's been with Helen for six weeks. Marianne turns away and tries to keep herself from crying, angrily asking why Connell is trying to get her to dump Jamie if he's not even single in the first place. He says he just wants her to be happy, and when she asks if he loves Helen, he says that he does.

Marianne starts crying. She tells Connell not to touch her when he puts a hand on her back, and then she asks him to leave. Before he does, though, he tells her that he didn't mean to leave her over the summer. He'd thought he might stay with her, he explains, but then things got confusing and didn't work out the way he'd wanted. She's shocked by what he's telling her and reminds him that he never even brought up the possibility of staying at her apartment—in fact, he said he wanted to see other people. He doesn't have anything to say to this, instead saying good night and leaving.

Jamie makes the assumption that Connell's mugger was a drug addict. In doing so, he reveals his entitled and condescending way of viewing the world, making it quite clear that he's incapable of showing compassion for people who are desperate for money—something he has never experienced and probably never will. Connell, on the other hand, is a bit more empathetic because he knows what it's like not to have much money. At the same time, he also disagrees with Jamie simply because he dislikes him. And Marianne, for her part, once again prioritizes Connell over all else, sending a clear message to Jamie that he isn't as important to her as Connell is.



The interaction between Connell and Marianne in this scene serves as a good reminder that they're still rather young and inexperienced when it comes to love—after all, Connell claims that he's in love with a person he's only been dating for a month and a half! Of course, it's technically possible to fall in love that quickly, but it's pretty rare. It's also possible that he's just saying he loves Helen as a way of making Marianne jealous, maybe because he hates that she's dating Jamie. Either way, though, there's a sense of emotional immaturity at play as they talk to each other about their love lives, since neither of them are capable of simply stating the obvious: namely, that they love each other and want to be together.



Despite what Marianne claims here, Connell didn't actually say he wanted to see other people. What he said was that he assumed she would want to see other people. Because they both assumed that the other person wanted to end the relationship, then, they broke up for no good reason—a frustrating illustration of the damaging effects of their inability to communicate effectively with one another.



13. SIX MONTHS LATER (JULY 2013)

Connell has been spending the summer traveling in Europe with Niall and a friend named Elaine. Helen, his girlfriend, is studying in Chicago for the summer—he talks to her on Skype at internet cafes, enjoying their conversations, even if sometimes it feels awkward to think of things to say. In some ways, he likes the feeling of *having* Skyped Helen more than the actual experience of Skyping her. But on the whole, dating Helen has changed Connell's view of relationships. He feels a clarity in their relationship, finding it possible to straightforwardly tell her that he loves her. In each city he visits, he calls her, texts his mother, and writes Marianne an email.

Connell's emails to Marianne are long and detailed. He pores over them, sometimes spending hours of his day thinking about what he'll write to her the next time he's at a computer. He likes describing ordinary things that he sees, feeling enlivened simply by the act of writing about his experiences and trying to communicate his thoughts to Marianne. He's even been writing some short stories, though he has yet to show them to Marianne, who's eager to read them because she loves his emails so much. Marianne is currently staying in her family's vacation home in Trieste, Italy. Jamie and Peggy are there too, and soon Connell, Niall, and Elaine will join them.

Last April, both Marianne and Connell were awarded **scholarships**. That night, they were expected to dress in fancy clothes and eat a lavish dinner together in the dining hall. The scholarship has drastically changed Connell's life. Suddenly, he doesn't have to pay rent, tuition, or meals, which is why he can afford to travel in the summer instead of working. For Marianne, the scholarship was just a nice "self-esteem boost."

When Connell, Niall, and Elaine arrive at the house in Trieste, Marianne greets them. She's in a beautiful dress, and Connell finds himself pleasantly overwhelmed by the sight of her. It feels to him like she's looking at his face and trying to read it—it's as if they can sense each other's emotions. He, for his part, can see that she has things to tell him. He already knows she'll be gone for the upcoming academic year, since she'll be studying in Sweden and might not even come home for Christmas. In the abstract, it hasn't bothered him that he might not see her for a whole year. He even liked the idea of continuing their email correspondence. Now that she's in front of him, though, he realizes he'll miss her.

By seemingly all measures, Connell's relationship with Helen is healthy and rewarding. The fact that he finds it easy to say what he means when he's talking to her is a good sign that she puts him at ease emotionally, even if he feels a bit shy when they Skype. It appears, then, that Connell has managed to establish a mature, functioning bond with somebody other than Marianne—and yet, he and Marianne are still in touch, suggesting that, despite his healthy relationship with Helen, he's still unable to fully move on from Marianne.



The joy Connell takes in writing suggests that he likes being able to tease out his thoughts, which he otherwise struggles to articulate. Because he doesn't have such an easy time expressing himself in conversation, writing is a way for him to tap into his deeper feelings. The fact that he sends such long emails to Marianne is yet another sign that he hasn't let go of their close connection—to the contrary, he's actively keeping their relationship alive by writing such thoughtful messages.



Once again, the difference in Marianne and Connell's economic backgrounds comes to the forefront of the novel. The scholarship highlights the different ways they approach the idea of financial stability: Marianne is accustomed to always having enough money, so the scholarship doesn't change much about her life. For Connell, though, the scholarship opens up all kinds of new possibilities—like, for instance, traveling through Europe instead of working for the summer.



No matter what happens, it seems, Connell and Marianne can't fully move on from their romantic relationship. Even though Connell is happy with Helen, he's overpowered by the mere experience of seeing Marianne for the first time in a while. Furthermore, his realization that he's going to miss her when she's in Sweden emphasizes just how much he cares about their relationship. Because they're so close on an emotional level, being apart for a long time is a daunting prospect.



The first time Marianne and Helen met was last February. Connell and Helen were holding hands, and though Connell felt horrifyingly awkward, Helen and Marianne spoke effortlessly with each other. Later, Helen asked what the story was with Marianne and Connell, but Connell had trouble talking about it—he just said they had a thing and was hesitant to define it any further. From then on, Helen made a point of trying to befriend Marianne, but she soon tired of this effort because Marianne didn't seem to care about her. She then started trying to get Connell to say negative things about Marianne, but he never went for it, which annoyed her all the more.

It's common knowledge these days that Marianne and Helen dislike each other. When he thinks about his relationship, Connell still feels good about being with Helen. He thinks she brings out the best in him, and spending time with her doesn't make him feel out of place or crazed by desire in a way that seems out of his control. With Marianne, on the other hand, he always felt like there was a "wildness" in her that made its way into him.

At the house in Trieste, Connell, Marianne, and the others have dinner outside. They drink wine and talk about their plans to visit Venice. At one point, Jamie—who has been criticizing Marianne all night—makes a racist comment about Asian tourists. Niall calls him out, but Jamie doesn't show any remorse. To avoid engaging in the conversation, Marianne goes to get the dessert, but when she comes back, Jamie demands to know why she didn't bring out cream for the berries. Silently, she turns around and goes back inside. Jamie tries to look around the table for support, trying to make it seem like Marianne overreacted. When nobody will look at him, though, he slams back his chair and stomps after her.

A yell comes from inside. Everyone at the table stops talking, and Connell gets up. When he reaches Marianne and Jamie, neither of them acknowledges him. Instead, Marianne asks Jamie to put down the champagne glass he's holding—she has already told him that the glasses used to belong to her father. "Okay, look, I'm putting it down," he says, and drops it to the floor. She jumps at him. Connell intervenes and directs her away while Jamie laughs. Steering Marianne outside, Connell takes her away from the house. They lean against a tree, holding each other, and Connell runs his fingers through her hair, feeling her tension unwind.

It makes sense that Helen would be jealous or suspicious of Connell and Marianne's friendship. After all, they have a long history together, and though Helen wouldn't necessarily know it, they have often prioritized each other over their current girlfriends or boyfriends. Worse, Connell isn't very communicative when it comes to talking about his past with Marianne, so he fails to give Helen the reassurance she probably wants—reassurance that there's nothing between him and Marianne anymore.



Connell's happiness in his relationship with Helen hints at the idea that sometimes extremely passionate connections aren't necessarily what lead to true contentment. Although Connell and Marianne are very close and love each other in an all-encompassing way, they never manage to make things work, which just leads to pain and heartbreak. Although Connell might not be as passionate about his relationship with Helen, then, he's at least able to feel happy and at ease with her.



There's some obvious tension at play in Marianne and Jamie's relationship. Their entire dynamic seems to be based on Jamie's selfish and entitled attitude—in fact, the racist comment he makes is a good indicator that he doesn't care very much about other people or about making cruel jokes at someone else's expense. What's more, the ominous way he walks after Marianne when she goes inside serves as a reminder of the other unhealthy relationships in her life, since his animosity toward her is not so unlike the hostility that Alan, her abusive brother, shows her.



The toxic, hostile nature of Marianne and Jamie's relationship comes to the forefront of the novel in this scene. Connell has already sensed that there's something off about the way Jamie treats Marianne, but now he witnesses some outright aggression. When he intervenes and takes Marianne outside, they share a moment of intimacy that is very obviously charged with feelings left over from their romantic history, and though Connell is dating Helen, he has no problem holding Marianne and feeling the way she relaxes into his touch—a clear sign that they're still emotionally attached in ways that aren't totally platonic.



That night, Marianne sleeps in Connell's bed so she can distance herself from Jamie. Lying there with her, Connell realizes he could have sex with her and thinks about what it would be like, wondering how he would feel about himself as a person if it happened. At one point, she says she doesn't know what's wrong with her, wishing she could be like "normal people." She tells Connell that her family hates her, saying that Alan told her to kill herself the last time she was home. Connell sits up, angry, and tries to understand why anyone would say something like that. He asks if Alan ever hits her, and she says that he does, though his psychological torments are what bother her the most.

Connell can't believe what he's hearing. He wants to know why Marianne never told him that Alan was abusive, and she says she didn't want him to think she was "damaged." Connell finds this idea too much to take. He starts crying—hard—and tells her to come to him. Then they're in each other's arms and kissing. He feels guilty because he knows he always thought of Marianne as "damaged" in some way. They keep kissing, and he slides his hand to her breast, but then she says they shouldn't keep going. She pulls away and turns around as Connell feels his breathing begin to slow. "I'm really sorry," he says, but she just squeezes his hand.

14. FIVE MONTHS LATER (DECEMBER 2013)

Marianne is studying in Sweden. She spends her time writing emails to Joanna and video-chatting Connell. After she broke up with Jamie over the summer, most of her friend group took his side—largely because he told them bad things about her. She's now seeing a Swedish guy named Lukas, who's a photographer. He doesn't actually know that much about her, but he doesn't seem very interested in her life anyway. She told him she was a writer when they first met, though she's not sure why. When they have sex, they play what Lukas calls a "game," in which Marianne can't speak or look at Lukas until he says so. Sometimes the "game" extends after they finish having sex. He says bad things about her, and if she breaks the rules, she gets punished.

Marianne's comment about wishing she could be like "normal people" reveals that she's constantly comparing herself to others. The implication is that she thinks she's incapable of functioning in everyday life, perhaps because she feels easily upset by the things that happen to her. And yet, the things that happen to her are genuinely upsetting—nobody would handle her life any better than she does, but she feels insecure about who she is as a person, apparently blaming herself for the ways in which other people mistreat her.



When Marianne opens up to Connell about her brother's abusive behavior, he feels overcome with emotion. It's actually a very similar interaction to the one they had in secondary school when Marianne told him that her father used to hit her. Back then, Connell responded by saying—for the first time—that he loved her, though he later wondered if he was ready to say such a thing. Similarly, he now seeks out the physical intimacy with Marianne that he had, until this point, been resisting as they lay in bed together. Once again, then, their emotional connection is so intense and all-consuming that it overrides Connell's better judgment.



Outside her relationship with Connell, Marianne's love life often seems to revolve around the act of submission. In other words, she tends to find her way into relationships in which she prioritizes the other person, especially in sexual situations. Again, the novel doesn't necessarily cast a negative judgment on rough sex, domination, or sadism, but it does subtly suggest that Marianne seeks these things out in unhealthy ways, since she doesn't actually seem to enjoy them. When Lukas says bad things about her, for instance, he most likely confirms her insecurities in a way that probably doesn't help her overall sense of self-worth.



Marianne goes to Lukas's apartment so he can take **nude pictures** of her. As he fiddles with his camera, she thinks about the falling out she had with Peggy after her breakup with Jamie. Peggy claimed she was Marianne's best friend, but she ended up siding with Jamie. Joanna is really the only one she keeps in touch with. She also didn't go home for Christmas, hoping to avoid the tension that always hangs over her house during the holidays. But when she told Connell she wouldn't be coming home, he said that Christmas wouldn't be the same without her, and she felt like crying.

Lukas tells Marianne to take off her bra. He then approaches her with a ribbon, intending to tie her up, but she tells him she doesn't feel like it. After a moment, though, she holds out her arms and lets him tie her wrists. Then he gets another ribbon for her feet. Again, she says no but then relents. Finally, he blindfolds her and says that he loves her. Suddenly, she thrashes away, hitting her head on the nearby wall. She demands to be untied and threatens to call the police. Lukas unties her and she gets dressed, telling him never to talk to her like that again. In an effort to make her stay, he tells her she's a talented writer. She laughs, tells him she feels nothing for him, and leaves.

At the beginning of college, Marianne seemed to enjoy having a large friend group for the first time in her life. But just because she had friends didn't mean they were good ones, which becomes overwhelmingly clear when Peggy sides with Jamie instead of her, despite Jamie's obvious mistreatment of Marianne. As a result, she's isolated from her original group of friends and is even more isolated by virtue of the fact that she's living in Sweden for the year, creating a sense of loneliness that's only heightened by Connell's kind comment that Christmas won't be the same without her.



It's a sure sign that Marianne and Lukas's relationship isn't healthy when Marianne says she doesn't want to be tied up but then lets him do it anyway. She clearly isn't interested in their rough play, at least not in any healthy way. On a certain level, she appears to understand that their relationship isn't healthy, since she reacts so strongly to him saying that he loves her—she's not in this relationship for love. She's in it because it validates her insecurities; she once suggested to Connell while talking about her relationship with Jamie that she felt like she deserved to be treated badly during sex. The same idea applies to her relationship with Lukas: she doesn't like being with him, but she secretly thinks she deserves to be in such a toxic relationship. As soon as he says that he loves her, then, their connection is worthless to her, as it no longer confirms her suspicion that she's unlovable.



15. THREE MONTHS LATER (MARCH 2014)

Connell sits in the waiting room of the counseling office at Trinity. He fills out a questionnaire that asks questions about his self-confidence, his attitude toward the future, and how often he thinks about killing himself. The other night, he couldn't even make it from the lounge room in his scholarship housing to the bed—he just lay on the floor all night, thinking about how long it would take to die of dehydration. He wouldn't mind a death like that, thinking it would be slow and restful. After the counselor calls him into the office, he eventually explains that he started feeling depressed after learning that Rob, his friend from school, recently died by suicide.

Connell has always been prone to feeling a little down. In the beginning of the novel, for example, it's revealed that he often feels a confusing sense of sadness in random moments, like when he experienced a feeling of melancholy after Marianne said she liked him after they had sex for the first time. Simply put, he's no stranger to sadness. It's not all that surprising, then, that he's now experiencing some depression, especially since Rob recently died, therefore adding an extra emotional burden for him to cope with.



Connell found out about Rob's death in January. Since then, everyone has been posting on Facebook about suicide awareness, and Connell's anxiety—which usually is moderate and manageable—has become hard to deal with. Worse, he feels guilty because he wasn't there for Rob. The last time Rob reached out was through a Facebook message almost two years ago—he'd seen a picture of Connell next to a girl at a party and had asked if Connell was "riding her." Connell hadn't responded. The counselor tells Connell that Rob's suicide isn't his fault, but this sentiment doesn't make him feel any better. The counselor also mentions that she wants to refer Connell to someone who can prescribe medication.

Connell is no longer dating Helen. She came back to Carricklea with him for Rob's funeral, but her presence didn't do much to improve his mood. He felt awkward and stilted in his suit, but when he saw Marianne in the church, he forgot himself—he involuntarily said her name aloud, and they hugged each other tightly. Everyone watched them embrace, but Connell didn't care; eventually they stopped because they knew they couldn't go on. In bed that night, Helen asked why Connell didn't introduce her to his friends, but he defended himself by saying he didn't feel like socializing at a funeral. His comment led to an argument about Marianne and how he didn't ignore *her*. He and Helen broke up two weeks later.

The counselor asks Connell if he has anyone he can talk to about his feelings. He mentions Marianne but adds that she's away for the year. But they still talk. He wonders if Marianne knows the things people have been saying about her, like that there's **naked pictures** of her on the internet—he's not sure if this is true. As Connell talks to the counselor, he reflects on the fact that Marianne is really the only person (other than Niall) with whom he feels connected at Trinity. Weirdly enough, he didn't feel like he had that much in common with Rob, either, but back then it didn't matter: in secondary school, everyone knew each other and got along if they were in the same social groups.

Part of Connell's depression has to do with the guilt he carries for not being there when Rob needed support. And yet, Connell would have had no way of knowing that Rob needed him in the first place, since Rob's lewd joke on Facebook certainly didn't hint at what he was going through emotionally. All the same, Connell beats himself up for failing to respond to Rob's message. His feelings in this regard are probably tied to his broader sense of guilt for leaving Carricklea to attend Trinity—his friends stayed behind, and now Connell feels like he abandoned them to study at a prestigious school.



Even though Connell's relationship with Helen was, for the most part, healthy and rewarding, his feelings for Marianne finally become too glaring to ignore—or, at the very least, this is the case for Helen, who can't simply overlook how much Connell cares about Marianne. Connell, for his part, is too wrapped up in his sadness to care much about his breakup with Helen, despite the fact that he previously thought their relationship brought out the best in him. His split with Helen therefore implies that his passion and history with Marianne is so emotionally charged that it has the power to overshadow other—arguably healthier—relationships.



Because Marianne is studying abroad, Connell doesn't have anyone to turn to when he needs emotional support. Instead, he's on his own at Trinity, which only emphasizes his feeling that he doesn't fit in among the other students, many of whom come from wealthy, privileged backgrounds that differ greatly from his own. Interestingly enough, Marianne is also isolated, since she's living far away from her friends, many of whom have turned against her in the aftermath of her breakup with Jamie. The rumors Connell has heard about nude photos of Marianne circulating on the internet confirm just how domineering and coercive Jamie was as a romantic partner—unlike Connell, who assured Marianne that he would delete any nude photos she sent him, Jamie apparently had no problem violating Marianne's privacy and putting them online (or, at the very least, spreading nasty rumors about those pictures being online).



Connell went to a reading a few weeks ago. A student named Sadie had invited him. She asked what he thought afterwards, and he said that he doesn't really see the point of such events. As he was articulating this thought, the writer himself appeared, and Sadie urged Connell to elaborate. He felt deeply embarrassed, but he soon discovered that the writer felt the same way. He went out with Sadie, the writer, and some other people that night and had a decent time, especially when the writer suggested that his difficulty at Trinity might give him some good material for a first book. He went home that night and looked at notes he'd been making for a story and, despite his deep depression, felt a small sense of happiness.

Even in the depths of a deep depression, Connell manages to find something that brings him a small amount of joy: writing. Although he doesn't particularly like the social atmosphere surrounding the public reading that Sadie urges him to attend, the mere fact that she invited him in the first place suggests that he's not as alone and isolated at Trinity as he thought. More importantly, attending the reading inspires him to return to his own writing, which is one of the only ways he has found of expressing and articulating his emotions.



16. FOUR MONTHS LATER (JULY 2014)

Marianne and Connell are lounging in his bedroom in Carricklea. It's hot, and Connell is watching a soccer game on television. They went out to a bar the night before, and Connell ended up dancing with another young woman and then going outside with her to smoke. Meanwhile, Marianne talked to Eric, who drunkenly told her that Rob would have wanted to apologize to her for how he treated her in school. Marianne now suggests to Connell that the woman he hung out with has a thing for him, but he brushes off her comment. She also tells him about what Eric said, and he agrees that Rob probably *would* want to apologize, but she doesn't feel like that would be necessary—the bullying probably hurt Rob more than it hurt Marianne.

Looking back on her years in secondary school, Marianne is able to detach herself from the painful bullying she experienced. In fact, she was able to detach herself from the petty social hierarchies even when she was still in school, but now it's even easier because those days are firmly in the past. Any insecurities she might have in her adulthood don't have much to do with her unpopularity as a teenager, thus emphasizing just how arbitrary and petty popularity really is—an idea that would have been helpful for Connell when he was still in secondary school and sacrificing his own happiness in order to protect his social status.



Marianne has been living at home for the summer. Alan has a job working for the county council, so he's not home much. When he is there, he follows her around and tries to get into arguments. Sometimes, Marianne spends her time doing housework because Lorraine no longer works for her family. She also spends time with Connell. They were driving together not long ago when he suddenly said, "You know I love you." She said she loved him back, and then they just kept driving like nothing had happened.

After all this time, Connell and Marianne are still very close to each other. Moreover, Connell is able to articulate that he loves Marianne. While his ability to say such a thing might seem like a sort of emotional progress, though, their relationship is still ambiguous and undefined—they love each other, but they haven't actually committed to each other as romantic partners. They thus act like lovers without fully establishing whether or not they're together in that way. In a sense, then, their confusing arrangement keeps them tied together but doesn't give them the benefit of a stable relationship.



Marianne tells Connell that she thought he was annoyed with her the previous night. They had been dancing together, but then he left her to go have a smoke with another young woman. He disputes Marianne's version of the story, saying that he asked her if she wanted to step outside. She disagrees. They go back and forth a few times about what really happened, eventually deciding that they must have misheard each other over the loud music.

Miscommunication still interferes with Connell and Marianne's ability to have a smooth, functioning relationship. Of course, it makes sense that they misunderstood each other in this specific context, since the music was loud. Still, though, their confusion is symptomatic of their overall struggle to clearly express themselves to one another. And yet, the mere fact that they manage to sort out the misunderstanding the next day suggests that they are—just maybe—getting a little better about actually voicing their feelings, which enables them to talk through problems instead of just making assumptions about what the other person thinks.



After a moment, Connell says he thinks things would be easier if their relationship were different. If there wasn't "this other element to the relationship," it would be easier for them to be friends. Marianne asks if he wishes they had never been together. He says he couldn't even imagine that, and then they both agree that when they were together during the first year of college, it was a very happy time. Marianne then admits that she wanted Connell to kiss her while they were dancing the night before. He wanted that, too. He's not sure how to navigate their relationship, though—it's nice hearing Marianne say affectionate things about him, but he knows their romantic relationship has never worked out in the past.

Connell opens up about his misgivings about his and Marianne's relationship and all of its complexities. The fact that he's honest about his reservations, though, doesn't mean he has a clear idea of what he wants. He notes that it would be easier if he and Marianne weren't romantically involved, but he also says that he—like Marianne—wanted to kiss the night before. Still, his ability to actually articulate his confusion is surprising, given that he normally withholds his emotions and keeps himself from speaking openly.



Marianne is crying. Connell says he has to think about their relationship. She has really helped him through his depression, so he deeply appreciates her and values their friendship. She stands up to leave, but he takes her hand and kisses it. He admits that he's nervous, saying it must be obvious that he doesn't want her to go. "I don't find it obvious what you want," she says. They start kissing.

Despite his attempt to speak honestly about his feelings, Connell can't quite make himself clear—and this, of course, is because he doesn't even know what he wants. Although he thinks his strong romantic feelings for Marianne are "obvious," Marianne points out that nothing could be further from the truth. Even though he tries to communicate openly, their relationship is so complex and ambiguous that it's impossible to arrive at any sense of clarity. In the end, their strong romantic feelings rise to the surface, as they start kissing even though Connell just said that it would be better if they had a purely platonic relationship.



Marianne and Connell start having sex, both of them relieved to finally embrace each other again. It's passionate and nice at first, and Connell expresses his desire to keep doing it in the future. But then Marianne asks him to tell her that she belongs to him, and he pauses. After a moment, she asks him to hit her, but he can't. The entire conversation ruins the moment. As they roll away from each other, Connell can tell Marianne is upset. He tries to apologize, saying that he thinks it'd be weird if he hit her. She hears this as him calling her weird, which upsets her even more.

Once again, Connell is daunted by the idea that he has so much sway over Marianne in their relationship. Marianne has said in the past that she would do anything he wanted, but this sentiment has never been something that pleased Connell. In fact, he reacted very negatively the first time he realized that she would gladly prioritize his desires if it would make him happy. It's overwhelming to have such a strong influence over another person, which is why Connell dislikes the idea of saying that she belongs to him—it's also why he doesn't want to hit her during sex.



Marianne says she's going to leave and starts getting dressed. Connell wants to drive her home, but he can't get dressed fast enough—she runs downstairs and out the door. On her way home, she thinks about how she dislikes the person she's become. Connell clearly finds her repulsive, she thinks, but she can't figure out how to change herself. When they were in school together, they were both struggling in their own ways. Now, though, Connell has become well-adjusted, whereas she has just become more and more messed up.

Marianne's self-deprecating thoughts are pessimistic and out of touch with reality. Connell doesn't think she's repulsive, but she convinces herself that he does. Her self-hating thought process aligns with her overarching fear that she's unworthy of love. When Connell first said that he loved her in secondary school, it was a shock to Marianne because she had never felt lovable before, most likely because of her troubling home life. And though she and Connell have maintained a romantic connection in some way or another for many years now, she still struggles with the same insecurity, constantly worrying that she doesn't deserve his true affection.



When Marianne gets home, Alan confronts her. He doesn't want her hanging out with Connell anymore since, according to him, Connell is “fucked in the head.” Marianne tries to say that Connell is doing well, but Alan won't listen. She slips away and locks herself in her room, feeling all the while like she's a bad person who has led a sad life and can never change for the better. She's holding the door shut so Alan can't burst into the room, but suddenly the door slams open and hits her in the face. Her nose gushes blood, which completely covers her hands when she takes them away from her face.

Until this scene, Alan's abusive ways have been deeply problematic but not necessarily as glaring or over the top as how he behaves in this moment. Now, though, his threatening presence in Marianne's family home becomes overwhelming—so overwhelming, in fact, that Marianne doesn't ignore the incident like she normally tries to do. Instead, she actively attempts to protect herself by closing herself in her room.



17. FIVE MINUTES LATER (JULY 2014)

Connell sits in the kitchen drinking a beer. Lorraine comes home and tells him that someone he went to school with is pregnant. He has already heard—the person was actually his first girlfriend. He wonders aloud if she's anti-abortion, but Lorraine criticizes him for being cynical, saying there are other reasons people have babies. Connell then asks if Lorraine ever regretted having him, wondering if she thinks she could have had a better life if she hadn't. The question scares Lorraine, who thinks he's hinting that Marianne is pregnant. Connell gets upset about her assumption that he and Marianne are still together, so he acts cold toward his mother, but then he feels bad about alienating everyone who has ever cared about him.

Throughout the novel, Lorraine has tried to urge Connell to acknowledge that Marianne is—for all intents and purposes—his girlfriend. Even after all these years, though, he still insists that they aren't together like that. And yet, he literally just had sex upstairs with Marianne, so Lorraine's assumptions about their relationship aren't misguided. Rather, she seems to have more clarity than Connell does when it comes to him and Marianne, as she understands that they're emotionally connected as lovers even if they don't always define themselves as such.



Connell's phone starts ringing. Lorraine has just gone to bed, and he's still sitting in the kitchen. When he picks up, he hears Marianne's voice. She sounds distressed. She says she “tripped or something” and that she hates to bother him but doesn't know what else to do. He tells her he's on his way. When she opens the door of her house, he sees that her nose is bleeding and that her eyes are raw, like she's been crying. Her wrist has dried blood on it, too. The sight of her like this makes Connell's vision swarm. She says she thinks her nose is broken, and then Alan appears behind her.

Regardless of how Connell and Marianne define their relationship, there's no denying that they have an extremely close bond—so close, in fact, that Connell can't bear the idea of anyone hurting her. It was hard enough for him to think about Jamie hitting Marianne during sex, a situation that she at least consented to. As he pieces together the fact that Alan is responsible for her bloody nose, then, it's all Connell can do to maintain his composure.



Connell tells Marianne to get in the car. She slips out of the house and gets into the passenger's seat. Connell then steps inside the house and closes the door. He walks up to Alan, who insists he didn't do anything. Alan is against the railing of the stairs and suddenly looks weak and frightened. "If you ever touch Marianne again, I'll kill you," Connell says. He adds that he'll also kill him if he says anything nasty to Marianne ever again. Through tears, Alan says he understands, and then Connell leaves. In the car, Marianne apologizes for disturbing Connell, but he tells her not to say sorry. He loves her and will never let anything bad happen to her again.

Connell and Marianne are very protective of one another. When Connell told Marianne about how Miss Neary took advantage of him, she vowed to kill Miss Neary if it ever happened again. Similarly, Connell threatens to kill Alan if he continues to abuse Marianne. On the whole, their protective impulses underscore just how intensely they care for one another.



18. SEVEN MONTHS LATER (FEBRUARY 2015)

Marianne makes coffee in her kitchen in Dublin. She works part-time now while finishing school. Nobody hates her anymore, though people don't obsess over her, either—she's just a "normal person." She brings the coffee to her bedroom, where Connell is still lying in bed. They talk about the night before; Connell got pretty drunk. Marianne says that Sadie has a thing for him, but he doesn't seem to care, saying she isn't his type. Marianne notes that she has no idea what Connell's "type" is, but he refutes this: she clearly does, since he's not actually as cryptic as she makes him out to be. Connell remains in bed, checking his email as Marianne goes to take a shower.

The fact that Marianne has a part-time job hints that she may have severed ties with her family in the aftermath of Alan bloodying her nose. After all, she has never had to work before, so it's possible that she now has to find ways of financially supporting herself because she no longer accepts money from her mother. Even if this is the case, though, not much seems to have changed in her daily life in Dublin: she and Connell, at least, appear to have the same dynamic they've always had. They're still close, considering that he's sleeping in her bed, but they also haven't defined their relationship, since Marianne tries to sense whether or not there's anything between Connell and Sadie.



Marianne spent Christmas this past year at Connell's house. All of Connell's relatives saw her as his girlfriend. Then, on New Year's Eve, Connell insisted that they go to a club with people from their old school. When the clock struck midnight, everyone cheered, and Connell kissed Marianne, saying, "I love you." It was incredible to be in his embrace while everyone watched, and Marianne was conscious of just how good it felt to be with him. She thought about how it's impossible to be completely independent from others, thinking that maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. She let herself feel linked to Connell, no longer worrying about whether or not he loved her. She knew he did.

There's a sense of emotional clarity at this point in Marianne and Connell's relationship. For the first time ever, they don't seem to doubt the way they feel about each other. But their relationship is still shrouded in ambiguity—they aren't technically dating, even if Connell's relatives think she's his girlfriend. It's almost as if they take each other for granted: they can always count on the fact that they love each other, but they can't count on the idea that they will always be together, at least not in a romantic way.



Marianne gets out of the shower and comes back into her bedroom in Dublin. Connell is staring at the computer screen with an odd expression. He was accepted into a Creative Writing MFA program in New York. Marianne hadn't known he'd applied and feels offended that he didn't say anything, but he defends himself by saying he didn't think he'd get in. She asks if Sadie knew, and he admits that she did—she was the one who told him to apply in the first place. He really thought he had no chance of being accepted, so he didn't bring it up.

Marianne tells Connell he should go to New York, but he says no. He doesn't understand why she would want him to leave, but she says it would only be for a little while. Still, he says he can't go without her—he wouldn't even be in Dublin if it weren't for her. She knows this is true and thinks about how different his life would be if they hadn't been together. In a way, she feels good about the fact that she opened up new possibilities for Connell.

Connell says that he loves Marianne and that he'll never feel the same about anyone else, and then he says he doesn't know what to do. If she tells him to stay, he will. She takes a moment, closing her eyes and reflecting on the fact that, if he goes to New York, he'll probably never come back. And if he *does* return, things will be different. They'll never have what they have right now, but that won't hurt as much as her loneliness used to hurt. He helped her overcome that loneliness—he changed her life for the better, just like she changed his. Thinking about how profoundly people can impact one another, she tells him that he should go to New York—she'll always be here anyway, no matter what happens.

Things are going well in Marianne and Connell's relationship, but there's still a disconnect in the way they communicate. Connell's failure to mention that he applied to a graduate program in New York spotlights his tendency to withhold important things from Marianne. He probably didn't want to bring it up because it would force them to talk about the future of their relationship—a relationship that really only thrives in the present, since they can never manage to actually commit to each other in a long-term capacity, even though they've had romantic feelings for each other for many years.



An important aspect of Marianne and Connell's relationship is that they have grown up together and, consequently, have helped bring each other into adulthood. Marianne, for her part, is responsible for helping Connell broaden his horizons, since he was originally planning on staying close to home and leading a life that would have resembled his life in secondary school. If he'd done that, it's less likely that he would have earned a prestigious scholarship, traveled in Europe, or gotten into graduate school. Marianne has thus influenced Connell's entire life in an extremely meaningful way, which is why he can't imagine leaving her to go to New York.



The ending of Normal People isn't necessarily a happy one, since Connell and Marianne don't end up finally figuring out a way to make things work as a couple. In another sense, though, the novel reaches a profound feeling of emotional closure, as Marianne reflects on the many positive things that have come from their relationship. The ending frames their connection not as something tortured and tumultuous, but as a beautiful gift that, despite its ambiguity, enhanced both of their lives—a gift of passion and love that, though unsustainable, enriched Connell and Marianne and helped them become who they are now.





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