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The Importance of Being Normal:

the Circulation of Affects in Sally Rooney



SALLY ROONEY



- Castlebar, County Mayo, 1991
- “Salinger for the Snapchat generation”
- English BA (Trinity College) / MA
- Examination of social status, individuality, and romantic love

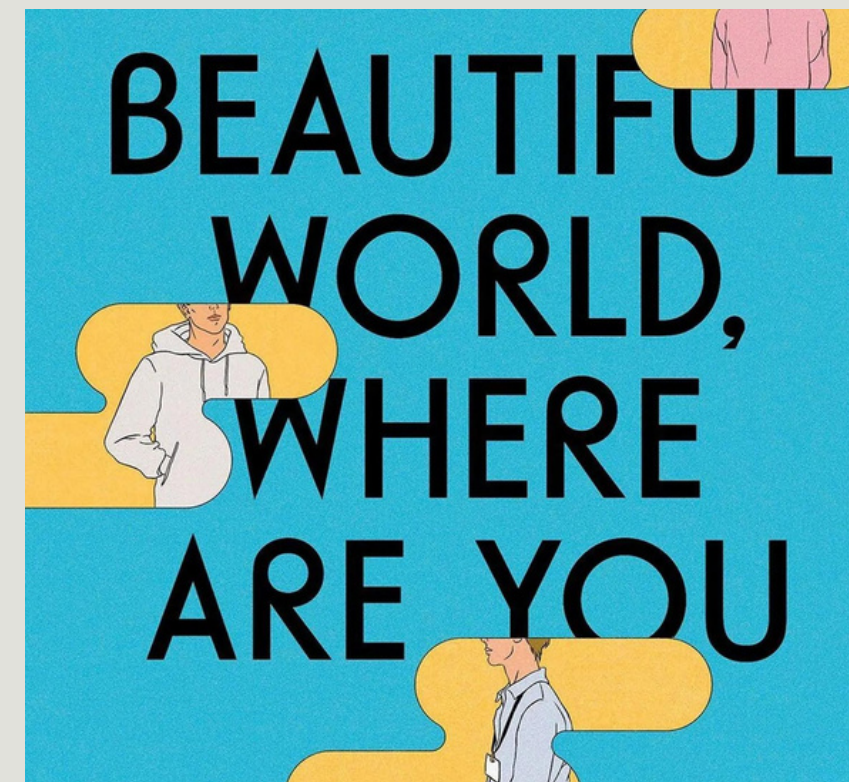
Novels



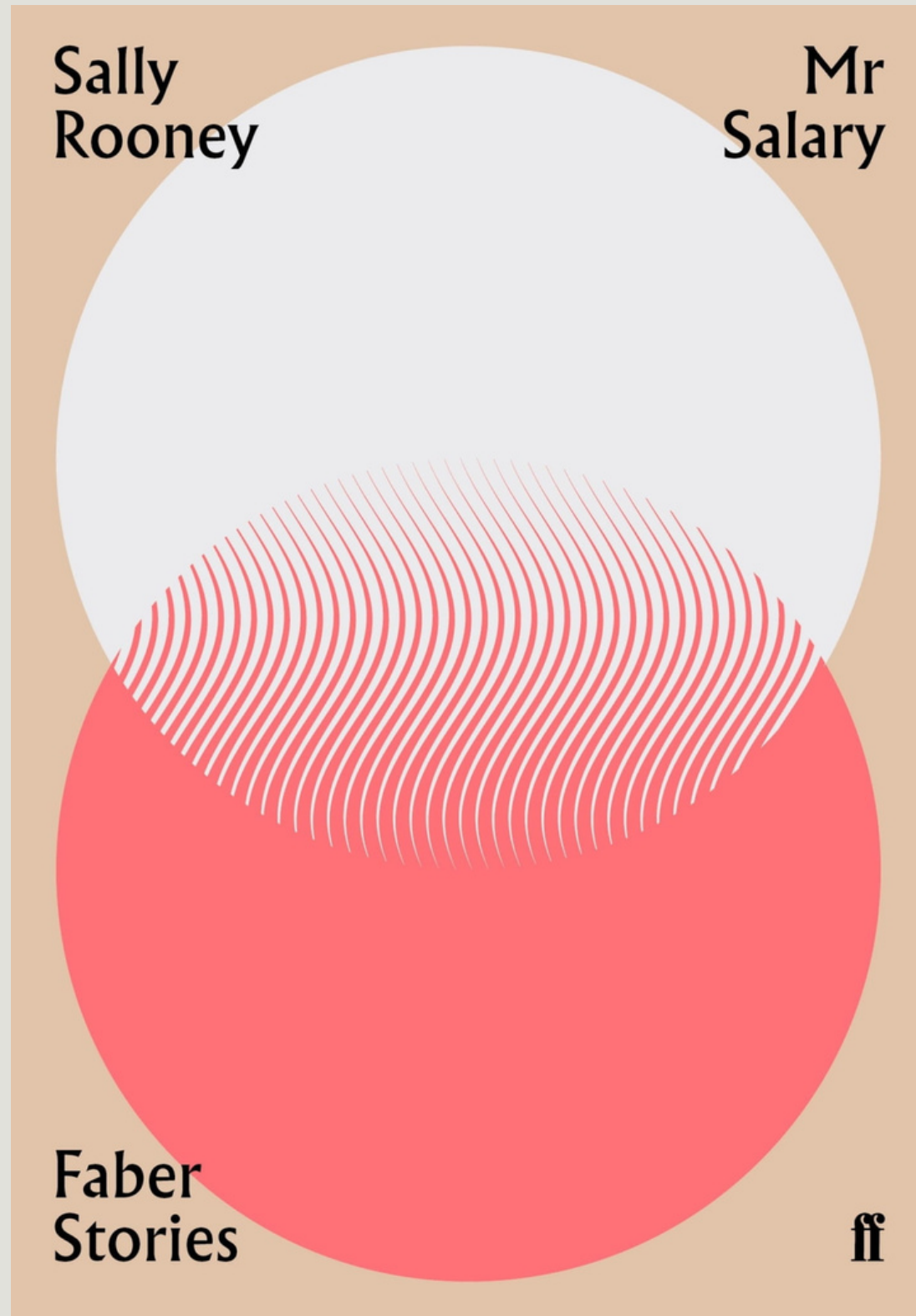
Conversations with Friends
(2017)



Normal People
(2018)



Beautiful World
(2021)



Short stories

- “Even If You Beat Me” (2015)
- “Concord 34” (2016)
- **“At the Clinic” (2016)**
- “Robbie Brady’s astonishing late goal takes its place in our personal histories” (2017)
- “Colour and Light” (2020)
- **Mr Salary (2020)**
- “Unread Messages” (2021)

TV Adaptations

Normal People

(2020)



Conversations with Friends

(2022)



What makes her prose so appealing?





Rooney's appeal

In “Robbie Brady’s astonishing late goal takes its place in our personal histories,” Helen reflects on the importance of live streamed events **“being recycled as culture in real time.”** She says: “You know, you’re watching the process of cultural production while it takes place, rather than in retrospect. I don’t know if that’s unique.”

Sally Rooney's prose feels like that—as if the readers were experiencing the *magnanimity* of an ephemeral circumstance that, often, feels *too overwhelming* to understand and, thus, to articulate. Her characters struggle with the *intimate* implications of the *global world* we inhabit.





Purpose of this session

- To make sense of the **quotidian unease**
- To understand interactions as exchanges that stem from a **negotiation** of **intensities** through Affect Theory
- To ponder what it means to be “**normal**” and determine if a certain standard of “normalcy” is possible in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland

What is Affect Theory?

PATRICK COLM HOGAN

- Literature is inseparable from emotion.
- Literature is a form of simulation.
- **Affect theory**: “historically contingent set of approaches partially shared by authors with similar backgrounds and interests” (4), such as post-structuralists.
- This field allows for “political engagement” as it “fosters a critical attitude toward some unquestioned presuppositions of empirical science and its associated institutional structures that can lead to systematic biases” (6).
- It draws (often implicitly) from a psychoanalytic tradition: we are meant to understand “affect ... in relation to a prior conception of fundamental **drives**” (4).

What is Affect Theory?

ERIC SHOUSE

- ≠ personal feeling
- Following Baruch Spinoza, affect is “an ability to affect and be affected” and a “prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in the body’s capacity to act” (par. 1).
- Following Brian Massumi, it is an **encounter** (par. 1).
- According to Shouse, it is a “non-conscious experience of intensity; ... a moment of unformed and unstructured potential” (par. 5). For adults, “affect is what makes feelings feel” and “what determines the **intensity** (quantity) of a **feeling** (quality), as well as the background intensity of our everyday lives” (par. 6),
- It is a “pure potential”: “a measure of the **body**’s readiness to act in a given circumstance” (par. 9).

Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or **intensities**.

(Seigworth and Gregg 1)



The Celtic Tiger

1994-2007

SENIA PAŠETA (2003)

“Contemporary Ireland is a modern and dynamic country whose booming economy remains a source of envy and wonder. The pace of change continues to astound visitors, especially those who knew Ireland before the Celtic Tiger began to roar” (145-6).



The Celtic Tiger

VARIOUS AUTHORS

- European Union (1973)
- Ireland as a “liberal, prosperous, cosmopolitan—a country that has achieved a distinct cultural identity, while assuming its rightful place within the community of nations” (Begam wtd. in Spiegel 88)
- From an agricultural economy to a mercantile one (liberal and capitalist) → “**neo-corporatism**” (Böss 119)
- O’Toole: “the heads of government ... ‘practiced the economics of utter idiocy’” (qtd. in Morse 246)
- Spiegel: “whereas revivalists turned to a legendary past and to the west of Ireland for a pure Irish culture distinct from the materialism of the British Empire, the **Celtic Tiger** turned towards the future and to the continent for an Irish culture that was **more European**” (91)
- From the image of power and wealth to the “leitmotif of Tigerish greed, blatant disregard for the well-fare of other people, and the blindness to the consequences of impetuous actions” (Morse 252)

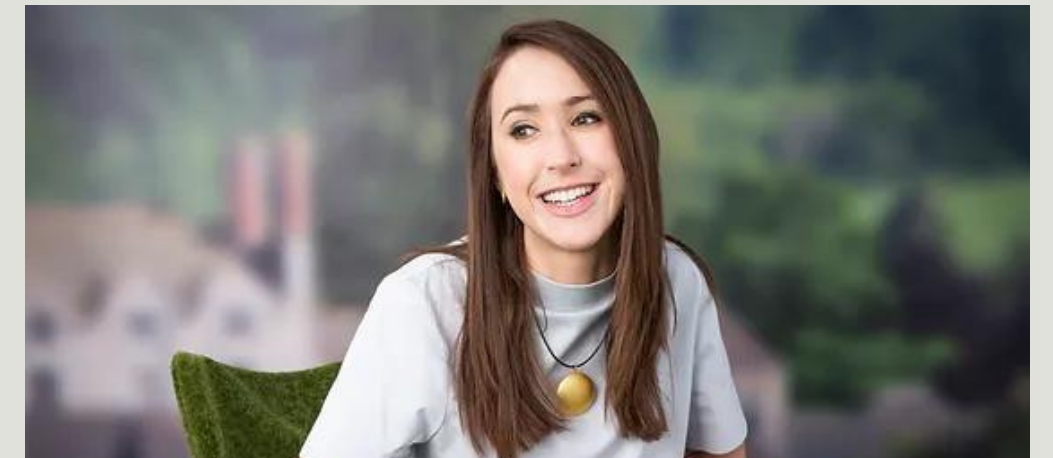
The Post-Celtic Tiger Period

CLAIRE BRACKEN AND TARA HARNEY-MAHAJAN

- This period “marks an important movement in the history of Irish women’s writing. It is a time marked by increased visibility and publication, dynamic activism and collective engagements, as well as significant garnering of public recognition to a degree that has never been seen before” (2)
- It is “the continued shaping of the continuum of women’s writing in Ireland, connecting to the past and to the future in a field that is ever shaping anew” (9)



EIMEAR MCBRIDE



RUTH GILLIGAN



SARA BAUME

The Post-Celtic Tiger Period

RUTH GILLIGAN

- Post-Celtic Tiger as a “renewed sense of uncertainty”: “the years that followed the crash have seen some of the most fertile and exciting developments in the Irish cultural landscape” (13)
- Renewed interest in narrative form and style

CLAIRE WILLS

- “Representations of female desire and of masculine violence and abuse of power are no longer considered threatening. Indeed, they have become a necessary part of a society’s reckoning with its own past” (295)



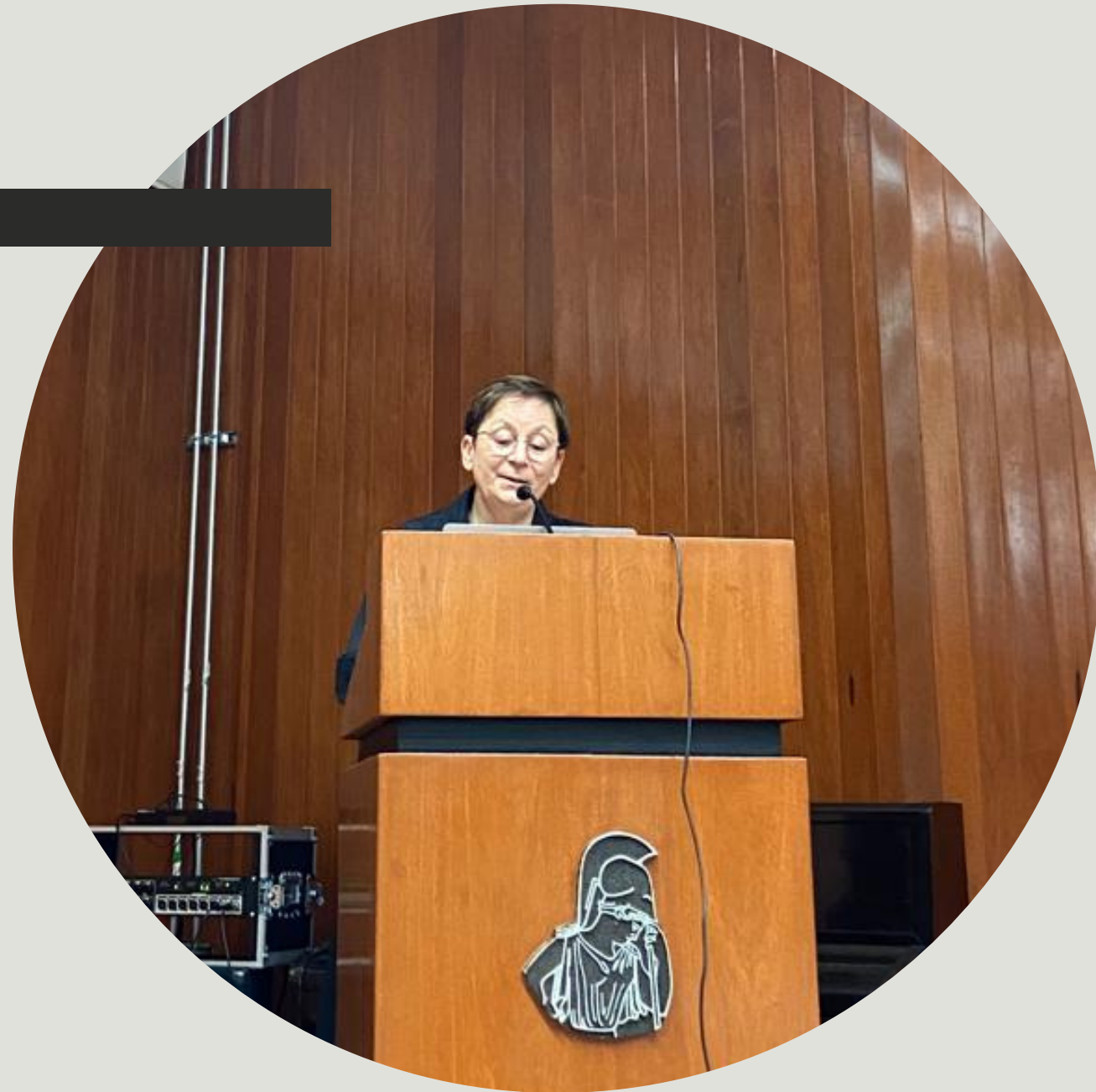
TANA FRENCH



CLAIRE KILROY



LOUISE O'NEILL



ANNE ENRIGHT

“Under the Skin – Reading Joyce With Rooney and McBride”

- Author’s relation to James Joyce: “claiming Joyce is a big thing to do”
- Vocation to welcome new challenges
- A narrative that is deliberately anonymous
- A state of equilibrium: accurate in relation to language and representation
- Cerebral and philosophical discourse (≠ conclusion)
- Writing relationships
- Discomfort and the loss of self
- Finding language experiences that have not been fair
- Characters who try to get in each others’ heads
- Concerned with class: outside a transactional way of thinking
- ≠ Shame: characters walking toward a certain purity
- Interest in getting closer to people through her characters

Language

Conversations with Friends

Marianne saw us holding hands in college one day and said: you're back together! We shrugged. It was a relationship, but also not a relationship. Each of our gestures felt spontaneous, and if from the outside we resembled a couple, that was an interesting coincidence for us. We developed a joke about it, which was meaningless to everyone including ourselves: what *is* a **friend**? we would say humorously. What *is* a **conversation**?

(289)



Language

Conversations with Friends

I considered calling Bobbi to talk about whether it would be normal to send an e-mail or not, but I remembered she was with her father. I wrote a sample message, and then deleted the draft in case I might accidentally hit send. Then I wrote the same thing over again.

I sat staring at my laptop screen until it went black. Things matter to me more than they do to **normal people**, I thought.

(29)



Language

Normal People

After a time, [Connor] hears [Marianne] say something he can't make out. I didn't hear that, he says.

I don't know what's wrong with me, says Marianne. I don't know why I can't be like **normal people**.

Her voice feels oddly cool and distant, like a recording of her voice played after she herself has gone away or departed for somewhere else.

(187)



Language

Normal People

Do you think you're smarter than me? [Allan] said.

She ran the wet sponge around the inside of the teacup. That's a strange question, she said. I don't know, I've never thought about it.

Well, you're not, he said.

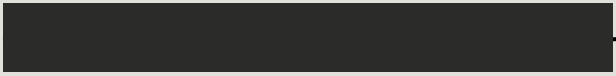
Okay, fair enough.

Okay, fair enough, he repeated in a cringing, girlish voice. No wonder you have no **friends**, you can't even have a **normal conversation**.

Right.

(147)





Q | NORMAL



Mr Salary

SYNTHESIS

During Christmas, Sukie travels to Dublin, from Boston, to see her father, Frank, who is suffering from leukemia.

CHARACTERS

- Sukie Doherty
- Frank Doherty
- Nathan
- Dennis
- Amanda

Negotiation of intensities

AUTODIEGETIC NARRATIVE VOICE (FIRST-PERSON)

SUKIE

- 24 y/o
- Boston
- Strained financial situation (student)
- Motherless
- Girlfriend-to-daughter spectrum
- “Frigid”
- Intellectual dominance to master distress

NATHAN

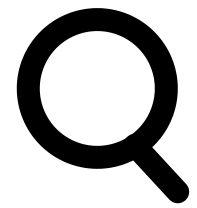
- 39 y/o
- Dublin
- Comfortable financial situation (employee) → Mr Salary
- Alive mother
- Niece
- Close
- “[O]nly had to make people feel things”

- House
- Family connection through marriage
- Love
- Empathy
- Sense of humor
- Physical attraction

The man on the rescue boat placed a pole with a hook down into the water, feeling for the edge of the object. Then he began to pull. We fell silent; even the man on the phone fell silent. Wordlessly the cloth pulled away, up with the hook, empty. For a moment there was confusion: was the body being stripped of its clothing? And then it became clear. The cloth was the object. It was a sleeping bag floating on the surface of the river. The man went back to talking on the phone, and the woman in the coat started signalling something to him, something like: remember to ask what time. **Everything was normal that quickly.**

(Rooney 10)





*"These cells may look fairly **normal**, but they are not."*

(8; 13)

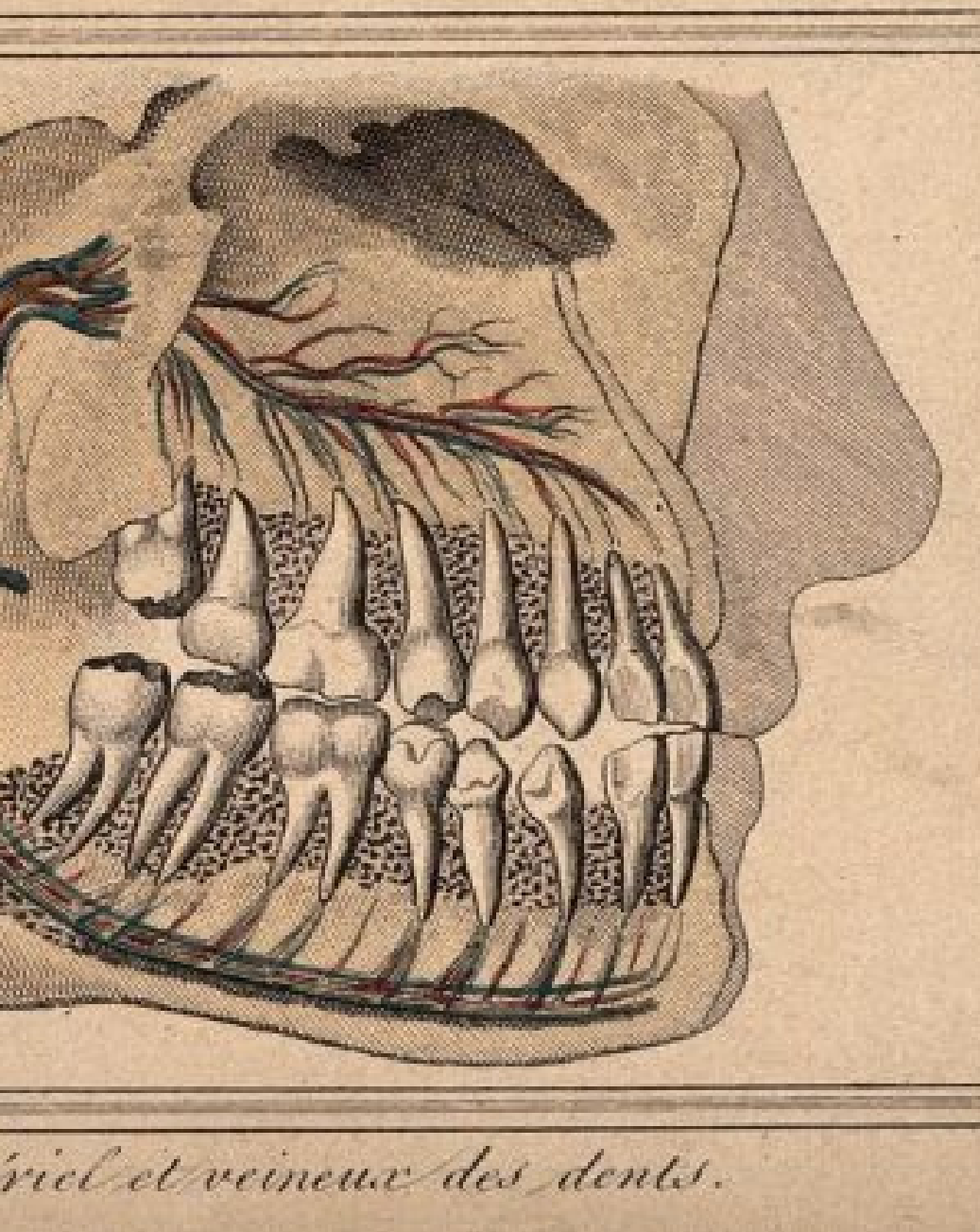


CENTRAL THEMES

- Love (esp. romantic love)
- Family
- Compassion
- Social class
- Illness
- Grief
- Domesticity
- (In)coherence
 - Identity (one's place in the world)
- Desire
- The insufficiency of language

“force or forces of encounter”

(Seigworth and Gregg 2)



“At the Clinic”

SYNTHESIS

Before Christmas, Connell accompanies Marianne to the dental clinic after a heavy infection.

CHARACTERS

- Connell (23 y/o)
- Marianne (23 y/o)
- Daniel
- Barry
- Lauren
- Steven

HETERODIEGETIC NARRATIVE VOICE (THIRD-PERSON)

MARIANNE

- Emphasis on the body
- “You complain more than other people” (par. 3)
- “a full human being” (par. 12)
- Cruel
- She “takes significant pleasure in having her pain validated by professionals” (par. 22)
- Wealthy
- “In school Marianne was ugly and everyone hated her” (par. 44)
- Contemptuous to others, but fearful of other people’s contempt
- Powerless
- “Sometimes I think I deserve bad things because I am a bad person” (par. 60)
- Fragile

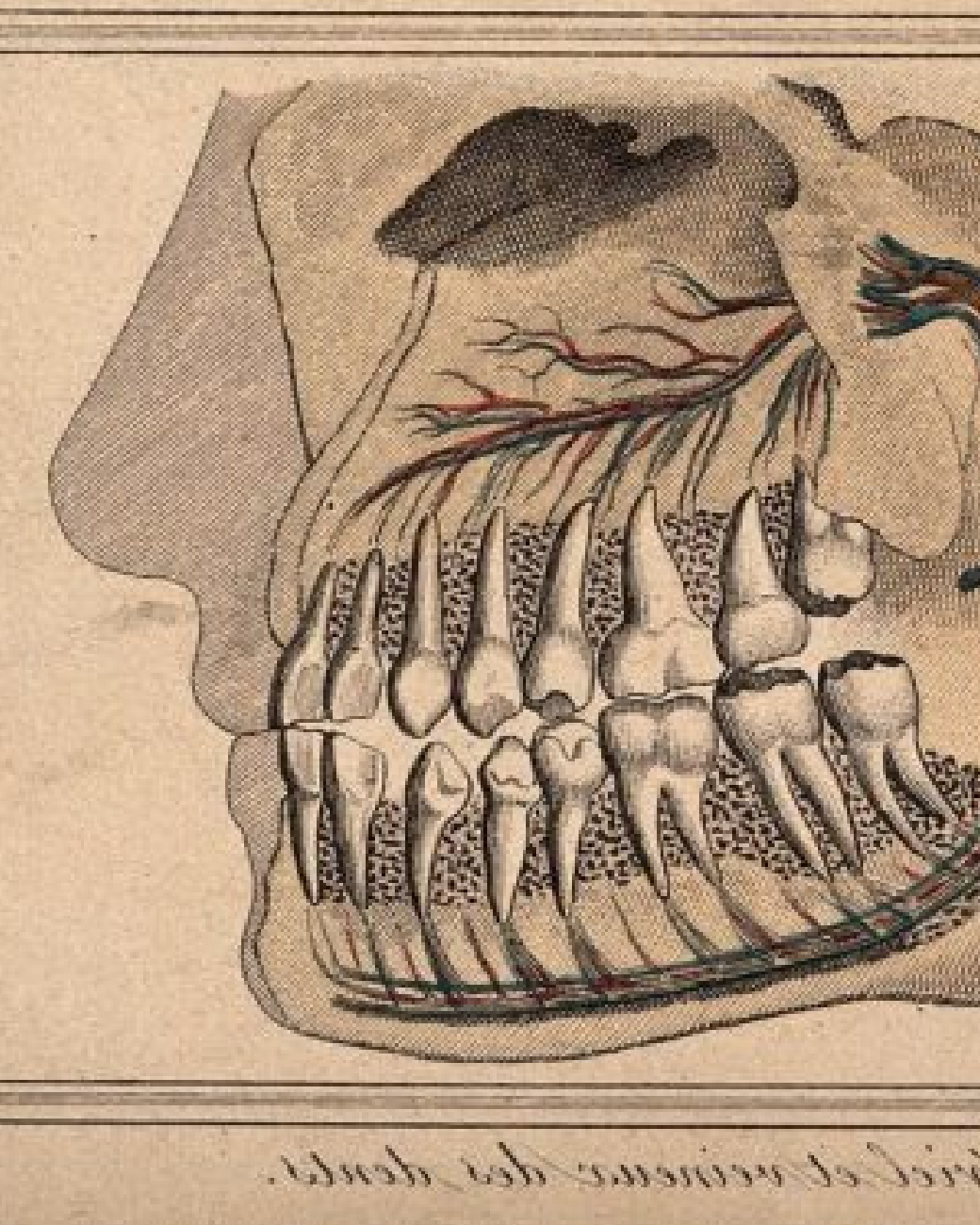
CONNELL

- Car
- Guilt → “Do you have to complain about everything all the time?” (par. 2)
- Unable to express sympathy
- “You don’t want to see women as fully human” (par. 6)
- Failure to feel anything—except with Marianne
- Cruel



- Sexual relationship, although not romantic
- For a time, their relationship remained hidden
- “gorgeously, stupidly easy” (par. 47)
- Same sense of humor





CENTRAL THEMES

- Love (esp. romantic love)
- Vulnerability
- Illness
- The body
- The quotidian
- (In)coherence
 - Identity (one's place in the world)
 - Identities (one's relation to the others)
- Desire
- The insufficiency of language
- Social class

“a body is never less than an ongoing immersion in and among the world’s **obstinacies** and **rhythms**, its **refusals** as much as its **invitations**”

(Seigworth and Gregg 2)

Insufficiency of language

SUKIE

- “like I was a character in slow motion in a horror film” (4).
- “The red brake lights of the car in front surfaced through the ice like a memory” (4).
- “I recoiled and scrunched up **like a porcupine**” (4).
- “as we moved from shop to shop, time skimmed past us like an ice skater” (6).
- “Outside the restaurant window it had started to sleet, and under the orange street lights the wet flakes looked like punctuation marks” (7).
- “Emotionally, I saw myself **as a smooth, hard little ball**” (7).
- “I felt feverish and stupid, like a thirsty person with too much water suddenly pouring into their mouth” (8).
- “He had no hair and his skull was round **like a pink pool ball**” (9).
- “I heard my own voice grow wavery **like a bad choral performance**” (9).
- “In the hallway mirror my hat looked like a dirty water vole that might wake up at any second” (10).
- “I nodded. My face was cold, burning with cold, red like a traffic light” (11).

Insufficiency of language

MARIANNE

- “That tooth is slicing through your cheek **like butter**” (par. 22).
- “This is a weakness and he knows that Marianne senses it, like blood in water” (par. 40).
- “It’s a clear day, cold and blue like an ice pop” (par. 50).
- “The tooth glistens like cream in the dentist’s palm” (par. 52).
- “The tooth has frond **like an anemone**” (par. 52).
- “She’s feeling woozy, **as though the tooth is a sick child she has given birth to**” (par. 54).
- “They scoop her out of the chair as if she’s a piece of newspaper” (par. 54).
- “Her face is lopsided and misshapen like a deflating tent” (par. 55).

[Connell] likes to think about this sadistically when he feels she's getting the better of him in **conversation**. In their last year of school he took her virginity and then asked her not to tell people.

(Rooney par. 44)





You don't have any news you've been waiting to tell me in person, do you? [Nathan] said.

Do people do that?

You don't have like a secret tattoo or anything?

I would have attached it as a JPEG, I said. Believe me.



...

Why? I said. Do you have news?

Yeah yeah, I have a girlfriend now. ... Actually we're getting married. And she's pregnant.

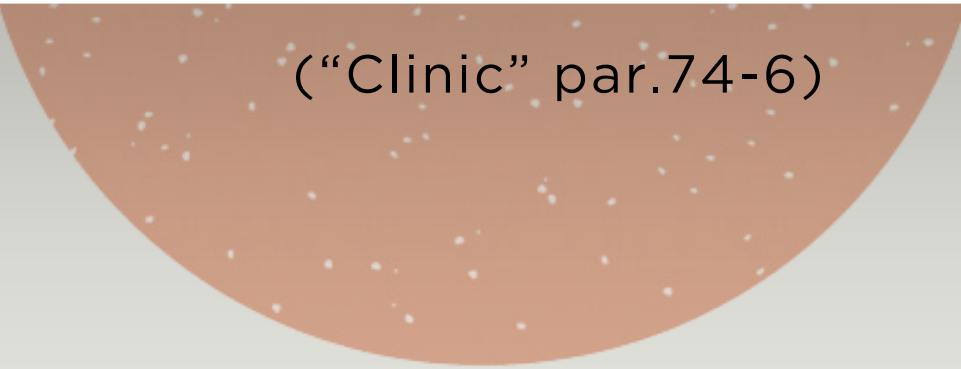
(Salary 4)





She hopes that her brash curiosity appears dismissive. This is one of many dynamic strategies she employs to conceal from Connell what she feels for him. What she feels is not easily expressed anyway. People love all kinds of things: their friends, their parents. Misunderstandings are inevitable. You're still crying, are you? he says.

The feeling is coming back now, she says. That's all.



(“Clinic” par.74-6)





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