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Radical Intimacy in Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo*

Intimidad radical en *Intermezzo* de Sally Rooney

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Abstract: Drawing on care ethics and vulnerability theory, this study addresses the prominent role of intimacy in Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo* (2024), set in contemporary Ireland. Written in a language that focuses on the protagonists' interiority, bodily sensations, and emotional world, the novel vividly portrays a "radical" sense of intimacy which helps characters reassess their phobias and insecurities within their closest relationships. As will be argued, intimacy in Rooney's *Intermezzo* is not just a matter of human connection, but of a personal transformation that allows protagonists to move away from the neoliberal and patriarchal values, norms, and stereotypes of today's world.
Keywords: Sally Rooney; *Intermezzo*; ethics of care; intimacy; vulnerability.
Summary: Introduction. Vulnerability and the "bodymind" language of vulnerability. Intimacy and self-transformation within relationships. Conclusion.

Resumen: Haciendo uso de teorías sobre vulnerabilidad y ética del cuidado, este ensayo aborda el papel clave que Sally Rooney da a la intimidad en *Intermezzo* (2024), ambientada en la Irlanda contemporánea. Escrita en un lenguaje donde aflora lo interior, lo emocional y las sensaciones del propio cuerpo, la novela construye una noción "radical" de la intimidad, que da lugar a que los personajes reconsideren sus fobias e inseguridades en el ámbito de sus relaciones afectivas. Se explicará cómo, en *Intermezzo*, la intimidad no se limita a la conexión emocional, sino que lleva a los protagonistas a alejarse de ciertos valores, normas y prejuicios de la sociedad neoliberal y patriarcal de hoy en día.
Palabras clave: Sally Rooney; *Intermezzo*; ética del cuidado; intimidad; vulnerabilidad.
Sumario: Introducción. Vulnerabilidad y el lenguaje íntimo del "cuerpomente". Intimidad y autotransformación en las relaciones. Conclusión.

INTRODUCTION

Set in Dublin in the autumn of 2022, Sally Rooney's fourth novel, *Intermezzo* (2024), revolves around the conflict and reconciliation between two brothers, the 22-year-old Ivan—a skilled chess player and a temporarily employed data analyst who lacks solid career prospects—and Peter—32 years of age, a prestigious barrister, albeit a highly tormented individual. Whereas Ivan discovers the passion and intensity of first love in the company of Margaret (aged 36, married but separated from an alcoholic husband), Peter still mourns his lost love life with Sylvia, now a close friend, and futilely attempts to repress his feelings for the "unsuitable" Naomi, who is 23 and squats in a tenant building. Both brothers are grief-stricken by the recent death of their father but will not seek consolation in one another; they instead remain estranged until the end of the story. As also occurs in Rooney's previous novels, *Intermezzo* dramatises the personal crises of characters who eventually learn to see through their own phobias and social conditioning. Her protagonists progressively reassess their hurts and abandon their obsessions when they stop being self-defensive and instead embrace emotional openness, care, and interdependency within their most valuable relationships. Rooney's work is thus representative of a trend in contemporary Irish fiction, which foregrounds "themes of subjective isolation and disorientation," in order to express a "yearning to reach back and connect" (Bracken 146, 148), and thus "cultivate a sense of empathetic understanding" (Cahill 604).[1] Even though there is much suffering and self-loathing, there is also hope and redemption in her novels, which become "quite optimistic about the human condition and about relationships," in Rooney's own words (Allardice).[2] Her fiction ultimately favours

[1] Rooney's fiction also aligns with what Silvia Pellicer-Ortín and Merve Sarikaya-Şen argue in their Introduction to a special issue on "Contemporary Literature in Times of Crisis and Vulnerability," when they highlight "the capacity of literature to make evident the interconnectedness bonding us humans through vulnerability and trauma but also through empathy and solidarity". "The imaginative world," they further explain, "can make explicit the fact that we are all bonded and inseparably connected and can reunite characters, situations, times and places in multidirectional and intersectional ways that mobilise our political awareness and caring affects" (326).

[2] Many readers have, however, labelled her three first novels as "sad girl lit," because they are "stories about introspective, essentially privileged young women" suffering much anxiety and insecurity about themselves and their relationships (Allardice). Yet optimism seems obvious in the final chapters of all her novels. We see it in *Normal People* (2018), for example, in Marianne's realisation that her beloved Connell "brought her

a basic principle of care ethics whereby individuals gain "self-respect" and "moral maturity" not through neoliberal markers of social success, like wealth or popularity, but through their "ability to make and sustain connections with others" (Keller 154). Such connections enrich and strengthen Rooney's characters' intimate bonds, providing increased security and stability in the face of the many vulnerabilities of human life.

For most of her stories, Rooney's central characters struggle with communication and emotional honesty, and their relationships become affected by constraints like social class distinctions, as well as gender and sexual stereotypes and objectification, causing shameful silences, anxieties, and alienation. Against the backdrop of the individualism of neoliberal times,[3] Rooney addresses "the existential need to feel loved and protected"; to ease their angst, her characters must transcend illusory notions of self-sufficiency, and develop a "deeper, less self-centered appreciation" of their significant others, resisting preconceived opinions and the temptation to instrumentalise relationships (Carregal-Romero, "If you weren't" 131). Rooney is likewise interested in personal transformation in the context of mutually caring relationships, an aspect she dramatises by being "consistently drawn to writing about intimacy, and the way we construct one another" (Barry). As reviewer Ellen Barry points out, there is a "politics of intimacy" in Rooney's work, which counteracts the harming effects of social standards of normality, likeability or even respectability. In *Normal People* (2018), for example, Marianne and Connell's deeply meaningful love relationship remains, for long, highly vulnerable to the judgments of others and their fears of not fitting in. If they manage to "form a lasting bond" at the start of the novel, it is thanks to their "shared sense of intimacy" (Carregal-Romero, "Unspeakable Injuries" 226). For Connell, being with Marianne away from the gaze of schoolmates feels like "opening a door away from normal life" (7), because "everything was between them only, even awkward and difficult things" (21). This intimacy helps them "navigat[e] family issues" and "social pressures," allowing Marianne and Connell to "emerg[e] stronger and more self-aware" as the story evolves

goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her" (266), or in *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021), when Eileen tells us that "the most ordinary thing about human beings is not violence or greed but love and care" (337).

[3] For more detailed appreciations of neoliberal/ capitalist culture in Sally Rooney's works, see Darling, Carregal-Romero ("Unspeakable Injuries") and Barros-del Río ("The Ethics").

(Yang 847). Typically, in Rooney's work characters experience "their true selves" within relationships which give them access to "genuine emotion" and "feelings of authenticity" (Eppel).

In Rooney's *Intermezzo*, acts of intimacy between main characters are minutely described and acquire much significance, as the affects they activate usually become an engine within the story.[4] As an expression of affinity and mutuality, of physical and/or emotional closeness, intimacy flourishes in a plurality of situations and relationships (not necessarily romantic or sexual), and thus encompasses "a field of encounters, relationalities, and entanglements within which we are queerly connected to others" (Weiss 1380). This reading of *Intermezzo* employs Sophia K. Rosa's notion of "radical intimacy" (7), an emotional force that challenges those neoliberal and patriarchal values, norms and expectations that can easily predetermine, infiltrate into and damage people's affective lives. Because "our normative modes of relating and living often fall short … in meeting our intimate needs" (Rosa 7), positive change can only be achieved if care and connection become central concerns. Intimacy is closely linked with affects like love, trust, and interdependency, and can create human attachments that defy and demolish social barriers and prejudices, like those based on sexist beliefs or class difference, as happens in *Intermezzo.* Some of Rooney's characters—especially the self-righteous Peter, who is "desperate for everyone to respect [him]" (420)—face much anxiety and insecurity within their relationships, and have to surmount self-imposed (but socially-induced) obstacles to unfettered intimacy (e.g. the emotionally repressed, competitive culture of masculinity affecting Peter and Ivan; Peter's sexual prejudice about Naomi, which hardly allows him to regard her as an equal partner in love; or Margaret's fear of how others will judge the age difference between her and Ivan).

Much of *Intermezzo* engages with the characters' "radical intimacies," how their feelings "of being seen" and understood by the other ultimately empower them to transcend the trappings of certain social conventions and moral standards. This sense of radical intimacy makes itself visible in Rooney's style of writing, which foregrounds sensorial experience, emo-

[4] In interviews, Rooney has repeatedly insisted on the importance of this topic in her fiction, declaring that "what [she] [is] interested in to a large extent is intimacy, the discomfort, the loss of self – of being penetrated literally and also psychologically" (Armitstead).

tional openness, mutual care, and proximity between characters. This intimacy, as shall be explained below, eventually leads to increased self-awareness and self-transformation.

1. VULNERABILITY AND THE "BODYMIND" LANGUAGE OF INTIMACY

1.1 The Vulnerability of the Self

The centrality of intimacy in *Intermezzo* is inseparable from the ways Rooney dramatises vulnerability. Even if it is conventionally linked to situations of loss and illness, discrimination and coercion, deprivation and exposure to harm, vulnerability can be alternatively experienced as "a matter of affective openness, a form of ambiguous potential, and an occasion for becoming-other than what one is" (Gilson 141). Vulnerability is an affective state, and a salient aspect of Rooney's stories is the psychological evolution of characters through their relationships with others. Because it entails a degree of openness, or receptivity, which potentially enriches the self, "we may well need to enter into and embrace vulnerability in order to have many other experiences that carry with them positive affective states and the possibilities of personal transformation, such as falling in love" (Miller 646). As shall be explained in further detail, love (within the couple or between friends) is Rooney's preferred way to write about intimacy, and how the interdependency it creates, though initially feared at times, emerges as a sign of fortitude and self-growth. Generally, her texts illustrate how, "by making ourselves vulnerable to others in close relationships, . . . we open ourselves to levels of intimacy not possible with those whom we keep at an arm's distance" (Engster 106). In *Intermezzo*, articulations of intimacy underscore the affective openness of vulnerability, of being influenced by the other. This is, in part, made obvious by Rooney's constant and sustained references to the physical and emotional proximity between main characters, as in the examples below (words in italics are my own emphases):

> "Consoling in its own way. Everything about her *nearness* is." (16)
> "Honestly just being *near* you, I feel really good . . . He looks at her, not speaking . . . Deep sensation like an opening outwards, inside." (109)
> "Low kind of aching sensation he feels, her *closeness*, heat of her flushed throat." (131)

> "The weight, the *closeness*, radiant heat of his body. Just to be touched by him, she thought . . . Her body, in his hands, was differently capable, something different, she was not the same." (391–2)

This nearness of intimacy is portrayed as nothing but healing, a way to transcend (even if momentarily) the characters' angsts and anxieties. By doing so, Rooney extensively explores what has been termed as the "vulnerability of the self—its susceptibility to impression, its malleability and openness, its formation and mutation through relation" (Gilson 47). *Intermezzo*—the title itself referring to a stage in chess which forces players to take risks—dwells on mental states of heightened susceptibility, like grief and passion, leading to situations that disconcert the protagonists' previous sense of self. Their task is to find themselves anew in relation to others, leaving behind some of their toxic (self-)judgments and prejudices.

Yet, in the social world Rooney recreates, only certain relationships (close friends and lovers, mostly) have a real emotional impact, something which may inadvertently fall in line with the isolationist practices of neoliberalism, as it "reflects the overwhelming absence of collective identification in contemporary Ireland" (Barros-del Río, "The Ethics"). Even if they hardly reimagine a more communitarian world, through their depiction of vulnerability, Rooney's novels attempt to put "the caring relationships between human beings at the centre of an ethical vision" (Pham). Within this paradigm, care is largely sustained by love, and, in Rooney's work, "what makes love intimate is that it affects our very sense of who we are as persons" (Helm 13), an experience that may initially be confusing and disorientating, but eventually rewarding. As one reviewer of *Intermezzo* aptly puts it, "Rooney's novels pose questions about what love is and how it shapes our lives" (O'Neill). Her protagonists lead intense emotional lives, and this is conveyed through a narrative style that provides unmediated access to the protagonists' interior worlds, thus highlighting their emotional vulnerabilities.

In Rooney's text, scenes move forward rapidly thanks to scant punctuation, incomplete or disjointed syntax, and unquoted dialogue, in passages where conversations, thoughts, and actions follow one another uninterruptedly. As a result, Rooney's texts "magnif[y] individual and limited perceptions of reality" (Barros-del Río, "The Ethics"). In similar ways, *Intermezzo* unfolds in close third person, in chapters that are either devoted to Peter's or Ivan's/Margaret's viewpoints. Characters' mental states are

also conveyed by a narrative style that closely resembles stream of consciousness in the case of Peter, and free indirect speech in Ivan and Margaret's chapters. Peter's turmoil (he entertains suicidal ideation and is sometimes shown under the effect of drugs and/or alcohol) finds expression in staccato sentences which underscore his obsessions and intrusive thoughts, as in the moment he walks through Trinity College and revives his past with Sylvia: "Scenery of old romances, drunken revelries. Four in the morning getting sick there outside the Mercantile, remember that. Scholarship night. Young then. Dark remembered walkways. Graveyard of youth" (13). In Ivan and Margaret's chapters, on the contrary, language usually expands to longer, more introspective sentences, especially so when they contemplate their experience of falling in love with one another: "A very strong feeling comes over him then: something inside himself warm and spreading, like dying or being born . . . It's related to her, the words she's saying, his feeling about her words" (52). Throughout *Intermezzo*, Rooney's language rarely deviates from her characters' interior worlds, and how their emotions grow and fluctuate in the near presence of their significant others.

This vulnerability of the self—"its malleability and openness, its formation and mutation through relation" (Gilson 47)—is further evoked by the ways in which protagonists enjoy intellectualising, not as a competition between them, but as an expression of their intimacy. According to Sam Waterman (230–68), Rooney's first two novels articulate a kind of sapiosexual desire which fosters human connection, as well as intellectual stimulation and increased self-knowledge. In *Normal People*, for example, both Connell and Marianne have several sexual partners, but only the sex between them is represented as meaningful and pleasurable. Oftentimes, their animated, intelligent conversations spark mutual attraction, and "[Connell] suspects that the intimacy of their discussions, often moving from the conceptual to the personal, also makes the sex feel better" (97). In *Conversations*, a similar sexual and intellectual connection was experienced by Frances and her ex-girlfriend Bobbi (now her best friend), when, as lovers, "in bed [both] talked for hours, conversations that spiraled out into grand abstract theories and back again" (304). In *Beautiful World*, however, such types of intellectual conversations do not take place between sexual lovers, but close friends Alice and Eileen in their exchange of emails, as they discuss matters such as climate change, world politics and economy, philosophy and art, which then lead to more intimate reflections on their respective lives. To Eileen, Alice confesses: "You know that

our correspondence is my way of holding on to life, taking notes on it, and thereby preserving something of my—otherwise worthless, or even entirely worthless—existence on this rapidly degenerating planet" (15). Even if their intellectual compatibility is important for both, the protagonists need to come closer in some other ways to remedy the mutual grievances they have been harbouring.[5]

Intermezzo returns to and amplifies Rooney's previous configurations of sapiosexuality, of a sexual and emotional connection that refines the sensibility and intellectual insights of characters. When he witnesses Christine's neglectful treatment of the family's pet (Alexei) and then decides to take back custody of the dog, Ivan refuses to nurse his usual bitterness at his mother, and is instead moved by "a strong pure clear feeling" while he imagines that "Margaret is in some way close to him": "Yes, the world makes room for goodness and decency, he thinks: and the task of life is to show goodness to others, not to complain about their failings" (270).[6] From the beginning, Ivan possesses his own intellectual and moral principles (e.g. for ecological reasons, he rejects air travelling and buys second-hand clothes only), but he also comes to reconsider former ideas about himself and life in general, linking these new discoveries to his love experience with Margaret: "It has occurred to him that perhaps the mind and body are after all one, together, a simple being . . . When he and Margaret are together, for instance, the intelligence that animates instinctively his gestures, touching, is that not the same intelligence that suggests to him the move that will later trap the knight?" (260).

The elder brother—the emotionally unstable Peter, who strives to maintain a façade of being morally "impeccable" (420)—similarly reconfigures his previous views on life as the novel develops. At the end, Peter begins to come to terms with his non-conforming love relationships with Sylvia and Naomi, when he realises how the "act of naming" (418), aside from concealing a set of moral assumptions, can hardly capture the complexities of human attachments, of his sincere affection towards the two women:

[5] For a detailed analysis of both friends' need to regain a sense of "narrative understanding" between them, see Carregal-Romero, "If you weren't" (136–7). See also Alférez for a careful consideration on the main topics of this novel, and how it compares to the previous two.

[6] This somehow echoes Alice's reflection in *Beautiful World*, when she expresses that "we hate people for making mistakes so much more than we love them for doing good that the easiest way to live is to do nothing, say nothing, love no one" (187).

> You say to yourself that a certain woman is my girlfriend: and intrinsic in this act of naming is the supposition of a number of independent facts . . . Is she or isn't she. Are they or not . . . He likes her, likes the other, and they both like him. To hold a little space for that. Surely everyone knows and accepts privately that relationships are complicated. Forget anyway about what people think . . . Why should you care, what are you so insecure about. (418–9)

Peter's newly revealed insight does not emerge in isolation; it is the result of both Sylvia's and Naomi's mutual respect (they know about the other's presence in Peter's life), their understanding attitude toward his anxieties and contradictions, their concern about his well-being, as well as their various conversations with him, where they challenge his presumptions and sense of moral rectitude. As the novel closes, far from being self-defensive, Peter welcomes these two women's influence on him and then admits to himself: "How is it possible he could have been so wrong about everything" (430).[7]

In *Intermezzo*, intimacy renders the self-vulnerable to the positive influence of the other. This interrelationship between intimacy and vulnerability is not just a matter of emotional or sexual connection, but also gives way to the characters' increased self-knowledge and more profound conceptualisations about life and relationships in general.

1.2 The "Bodymind" Language of Intimacy

Rooney's representations of intimacy have "forensic qualities" that have been noted by critics like Carol Dell'Amico, who, in her reading of *Conversations with Friends* (2017), observes the writer's "merciless, quasi-demographic exposure of her characters' lives," which "systematically betray[s] [their] vanities and weaknesses," through "pointed attention to [the] somatic body" (135). Similarly, in *Intermezzo* affects are highly mediated by the body's sensations; for example, the frequently repeated word

[7] Rooney's Frances in *Conversations* similarly remarks that "it felt good to be wrong about everything" (233), when Nick declares his love for her. Many of Rooney's protagonists—including Peter in *Intermezzo*, Alice and Eileen in *Beautiful World*, or Marianne in *Normal People*—struggle with low self-esteem and a negative self-image. It is their experience of feeling loved and protected that reverts such situation, allowing them to perceive how wrong they were about themselves and others.

"touch" (with its several inflections) constantly foregrounds both physical and emotional intimacy, not just in sexual scenes, but in ordinary situations too. When Ivan asks Margaret whether he can bring his late father's dog (Alexei) to her home for the weekend, she feels "her phone growing hot against the rim of her ear" and becomes "oddly touched" by his tender concern for the animal (303). Peter and Ivan also have their moments of connection: as they dine together and converse animatedly, Ivan finds himself "laughing then, feeling a little drunk" (165), "touched" by Peter's care about him, his way of "being tactful," and "a nice person, a good brother" (163)—this happens right before Peter's unfortunate, sexist judgment on Margaret's older age, which provokes Ivan's rage, "a hot kind of trembling feeling all over his body" (167). Peter's caring nature, which contrasts with his "untouchable righteousness" (219), is further appreciated by Naomi after her eviction, when he offers her solace, protection, and accommodation: "I'm actually touched by that, like emotionally" (227). Physical touch, too, activates emotions of mutuality, as happens to Margaret when she kisses Ivan publicly for the first time:

> Touching her with his hands, drawing her close to him, he kisses her lips. Why with him is it like this, she wonders. The touch of his hands to her body, his voice when he speaks, his particular looks and gestures. Parting her lips she tastes the salt wet of his tongue. Feels his hand in her hair. The miracle of existing completely together. (178)

At this moment of intimate connection, Margaret abandons her reticence to be seen as Ivan's lover: "How constricting, how misshapen her ideas of life have been before" (180). In another scene, Sylvia's affectionate touch transmits her desire for Peter to reconcile himself with the loss of their former life together (she ended their love relationship after a car accident that left her with chronic pain and unable to have penetrative sex): "The touch of her hand at his face, the same and not the same: both the same and not. To reunite him with himself he thinks she means to. To feel himself continuous with his past" (416).

Taking all prior considerations into account, from the emotional attachments to the intellectual stimulation between characters, one can argue that Rooney's representations of intimacy (and vulnerability, too) resemble what cultural theorist Akemi Nishida describes as the "between-the-lines feelings and senses that care activates," which engender "the invisible force or energy" that "circulates *between* people," shaping their "vitality

and well-being" (22, emphasis in the original). The impact of this "invisible force" manifests on the body as much as in the mind, and that is why Nishida adopts the concept of "bodymind" to explore "what a body can do or how a body affects or is affected by its surroundings" (24). To assess the transformative power of care and intimacy, Nishida urges us not to restrict one's attention to the more abstract realm of subjectivity, but to inspect the "subtle ways that a bodymind affects others—the heat it releases, the rhythm it beats, the odor it radiates, the touch sensed by others and with which it saturates others" (24).

Applied to *Intermezzo*, this notion of the "bodymind" may remind us of Rooney's vivid and consistent depictions of bodily sensations, such as tactile stimuli throughout the text, but also of her character Ivan's existential conviction that body and mind are not separate after all. Rooney further evokes this "force or energy" of the bodymind in passages where protagonists embrace personal change through their physical and emotional contact with others. Consider the quote below, when, after an intimate conversation with Ivan, Margaret decides to abandon her guilt and public role as the long-suffering wife of Ricky (her estranged, alcoholic husband):

> In [Ivan's] arms, to be given life, and to give life also. Something miraculous, inexpressible, perfect . . . To be that person, yes . . . Sense of all the windows and doors of her life flung open. Everything exposed to the light and air. Nothing protected, nothing left to be protected anymore. A wild woman, her mother called her. A shocking piece of work. And so she is. Lord have mercy. (396–97)

Through spatial metaphor (windows and doors left open to the exposure of light and air), Rooney blends emotional and bodily sensations, stressing Margaret's newly discovered energy and vitality in the company of Ivan. The other protagonist, Peter, also experiences some moments of a bodymind communion with both Sylvia and Naomi. What sustains his love for Sylvia, for example, is their profound sense of shared intimacy, which has not gone away after their formal separation as a couple: "Ease and lightness in his body he feels . . . In companionable quiet for a time they lie there, tired he thinks, and happy, inexpressibly happy . . . To feel again" (286).

Pervasive in *Intermezzo,* Rooney's language of "radical" intimacy highlights the presence of the body and, with it, the realm of sensual experience in connection with others, in situations which disarm the characters'

defense mechanisms, thus enabling a new understanding of themselves and others. This bodymind rendition of affects becomes one other effective way in which Rooney brings intimacy to the forefront of her protagonists' psychological characterisation.

2. INTIMACY AND SELF-TRANSFORMATION WITHIN RELATIONSHIPS

As explained so far, Rooney's stories concentrate on relationship dynamics, and how one's sense of self can be transformed though intimate connection with the other. Yet the writer is not oblivious to the fact that relationships trace their specific, unique, interpersonal trajectories, and that they "do not simply arise naturally; they are constructed by material, discursive, and ideological conditions in a given context" (Robinson 5). As shall be explained, Rooney's protagonists need to move away from certain neoliberal and patriarchal values that cause conflict, misunderstanding, and/or discomfort within their most valuable relationships.

A central relationship in *Intermezzo* is the one between brothers Peter and Ivan in the wake of their father's death. As can be inferred from both brothers' memories of growing up together, several unresolved personal issues—bitter conflicts and moments of emotional neglect, cruelty, and competition between them—negatively intermix with their socialisation as males. In his close reading of Rooney's male characters, Angelos Bollas perceives a recurrent pattern of "impossible male homosociality" in contemporary Ireland:

> By repressing their admiration toward one another . . . and by engaging in public expressions of belittling one another, men can find themselves in situations where homosociality becomes impossible for them. Rigid adherence to social scripts of masculinity can become an obstacle for men to form serious and meaningful bonds with one another. (8)

This situation described by Bollas greatly hinders male-to-male intimacy. In *Intermezzo,* caring, loving affects are rarely expressed between Ivan and Peter—yet, when tensions and disagreements erupt, they readily resort to aggressiveness, whether verbal or physical. At the core of their relationship is their fear or reluctance to be open about their vulnerability, as well as their unspoken desires to obtain the other's support and validation. In the episode where Naomi meets Ivan at the brothers' old family house (she starts living there after her eviction), she tells him what Peter cannot bring

himself to confess: "He's seriously not doing well. Ever since your dad died, I'm sorry . . . And he's upset that you're not speaking to him, obviously . . . You know, he really loves you" (340). Ivan's sudden reaction is to feel "embarrassed" (340), as Naomi's words exert a kind of moral pressure on him. Ivan now recalls memories of how his elder brother used to protect him in his boyhood, and how he, in turn, failed to give the broken, tearful Peter some consolation right after Sylvia's car accident.[8] Like Naomi, the other two female protagonists, Sylvia and Margaret, become crucial for Peter and Ivan's reconciliation at the end of the story. Their positive influence, which grows from these women's attachments to the brothers, illustrates Rooney's broader view of intimacy as including all those "relationalities" and "entanglements within which we are queerly connected to others" (Weiss 1380). On Sylvia's advice, for instance, Peter calls his brother after the funeral to check how he is coping; Margaret, on her part, encourages Ivan to reconsider his grievances towards Peter, because "surely [their] loss is something that should be shared, expressed, consoled, not kept separate and silent" (252). In the final episode, unbeknownst to Ivan, Peter attends his brother's chess tournament and witnesses his victory. When Margaret reunites them, they engage for the first time in an open-hearted conversation where they admit their own wrongs, express admiration for one another, and open up about their feelings: "[Dad] would be so proud of you if he were here. That's why I wanted to be here, just to say that. And to say that he loved you, and I love you. In a low voice Ivan answers: I love you too" (434). In the last pages, Rooney has Ivan and Peter reconstruct a bond of brotherly intimacy, one which helps break the emotional barriers of masculinity and find reconciliation.[9]

In her explorations of intimacy in *Intermezzo,* Rooney also poses some important questions about morality, and what this means to her characters. Margaret and Peter, for instance, repeatedly show an obsession to be "in the right" (394), but their appreciation of what is right or wrong simply

[8] Referring to this particular memory of Ivan's failure to take care of Peter, reviewer Anthony Cummins astutely notes: "The greatest drama [in *Intermezzo*] comes from conversations taking place under the pressure of life-changing events in the novel's pre-history . . . The reader always feels different layers of grief at play—buried pain exhumed by fresh hurt."

[9] Rooney's Peter and Ivan are not as stereotypically masculine as some of her previous male characters, such as Nick (in *Conversations*), Connell (*Normal People*), or Alex (*Beautiful World*). Yet, the two brothers in *Intermezzo* also suffer from an emotional repression that prevents them from being open to one another.

adjusts to the social standards and widely shared values of their patriarchal, neoliberal/capitalist culture. Arguably, their mistake is to regard morality as existing "in a series of universal rules or principles," instead of locating it in the "practices of care" and "responsibilities" they fulfill toward particular others (Robinson 4). As indicated above, Rooney's work follows a care ethics approach where close relationships acquire an "ethical dimension" that becomes "fundamental to human flourishing" (Bowlby et al. 42). Gender norms and stereotypes feed into Margaret's obsession about being wrong about her attraction to the younger Ivan, as she knows that, for a woman like her, it is a "shameful thing, the sexual motive" (386). Whenever she tries to convince Ivan that she is not the right person for him, his comforting, loving words make her reassess her presumptions and believe in the "truth" of their relationship (259), which, for her, has acquired "a certain moral quality" (187). As Margaret walks with Ivan on one of those occasions, she observes: "Golden-green fields stretching out into the faint blue distance. Limitless clear air and light everywhere around them, filled with the sweet liquid singing of birds" (122). As can be seen in this quote, articulated in a kind of bodymind language, their intimate bond becomes a transformative experience, allowing Margaret to look at life with fresh eyes.[10] With this decision to leave her alcoholic husband for Ivan, Margaret is also escaping the self-sacrificing, nurturing role typically expected from women within their patriarchal milieu.

Like Margaret, Peter struggles with the "moral dilemma" (63) of a relationship with a younger lover, the twenty-three-year-old Naomi, who hails from a dysfunctional family, has no profession and comes to depend on him financially.[11] Some critics have pointed out that Rooney's portrayals of romantic love "typif[y] and perpetuat[e] problematic role models for

[10] Contrast this body-mind language with the generally descriptive tone of Ivan and Margaret's chapters: "This morning they ate breakfast together, talking a little. She made him coffee in the cafetière and he said the coffee was good. Last night she thought: he's too young, too much in grief over his father, it has to stop" (117).

[11] Cross-class relationships feature in Rooney's four novels – in all cases, class difference has notable effects in how characters interact, and how they feel about the transaction of money between them. There is a passage in *Conversations*, for example, where Frances asks Nick, her rich married lover, to help her pay the rent, since her alcoholic father had stopped sending her money. Though Nick readily accepts to transfer the required amount, he does express some concern over the moral implications of this: "Yeah, it's weird. I have money that I don't urgently need, and I would rather you had it. But the transaction of giving it to you would bother me" (198).

millennials" (Barros-del Río, "Feminism" 47), as they arguably put "men in a position of superiority" over female characters that constantly underestimate and undermine themselves (51). Such power imbalance seems less obvious in *Intermezzo*; despite her underprivileged background, the younger Naomi emerges as a more emotionally stable, even wiser, character than Peter. Peter's chapters foreground his "vanities and weaknesses" for the reader (Dell'Amico 135), who easily perceives his misapprehensions and shortcomings.

Although they have been dating for a year, Peter keeps Naomi separate from friends, family, and acquaintances, sure as he is that their relationship lacks social respectability and could therefore destroy his "reputation" (74). While his past with Sylvia (then his college classmate, now a lecturer at Trinity) represents "the right life" he would like to recover (78), his present situation with Naomi is fraught with much insecurity and confusion, as their mutual longing contradicts his self-conviction that their relationship is merely a "distraction" (354). As readers slowly learn, Peter feels disoriented by the intimacy of their attachment—by "the discomfort" and "loss of self" which, in Rooney's words, intimacy can produce (Armitstead). At one point, Naomi complains: "Every now and then, you just act cold with me for no reason. Or randomly stop speaking to me. To make sure I don't get too attached. Eyes closed, he swallows. Right, he says. Or to make sure I don't" (227). Peter is, in this respect, similar to several other characters in Rooney's first three novels,[12] who face crises of "increased vulnerability and undesired dependency" (Carregal-Romero, "Unspeakable Injuries" 214), which they have to overcome in order to embrace emotional honesty and genuine connection within their relationships.

In addition, Peter's class-based prejudices—that Naomi is only using him for his money and status—poisons their affective life, creating suspicions and misunderstandings which lead to cruel and dismissive attitudes on his part. When Naomi tells him that she is in overdraft, Peter feels dismayed and troubled, and instantly wonders if she has any other "idiot showering her with money" (64). He makes

[12] Take, for instance, the self-defensive attitude of Alice in *Beautiful World,* who in the early months of her relationship with Felix, can barely accept her emotional dependence on him: "I feel so frightened of being hurt—not the suffering, which I know I can handle, but the indignity of suffering, the indignity of being open to it" (137).

> an effort to emphasise that he expects nothing in return for his money . . . Then on a purely human interpersonal level she feels hurt and rejected by his coldness. Money overall a very exploitative substance, creating it seems fresh kinds of exploitation in every form of relationality through with it passes. (65)

Peter's money-related anxieties mingle with his unacknowledged sexism.[13] For much of the novel, Peter not only disparages Margaret as a childless, unhappy, married woman who wants to take advantage of his innocent brother, but also refuses to treat Naomi as an equal, so, despite her constant reclaiming of his care and attention, he self-conveniently judges: "you don't like nice people" (72). At the heart of Peter's misappreciation is his sexual prejudice (on social media, Naomi used to sell naked pictures to make ends meet), which provokes his occasional disrespect and trivialisation of her experiences; he, for instance, thinks of her as wasting his money on "ketamine and eyelashes extensions" (125). Yet, at the same time, Peter does like her personality and is aware of his feelings for her (Sylvia, too, helps him accept such emotions). Peter's defense mechanisms crumble at the end, when he receives Naomi's loving care after his blackout (caused from binge drinking):

> You think I don't have feelings?
> For me? he says. I think it would be better if you didn't.
> Why, you don't care about me? If something happened to me, it wouldn't affect you?
> Feels himself flinching at the question and says: Don't talk like that. Of course it would. (407)

After this, Peter and Naomi take the chance to sincerely talk about the nature of their relationship, of how their "feelings got involved" (408). There is a pattern in Rooney's novels whereby love and positive interdependency become articulated through practices of care and emotional openness, which reaffirm and strengthen intimacy while easing and dismantling the characters' insecurities and false presumptions.

[13] He ironically features as a well-respected barrister who has successfully taken cases defending women's rights in the workplace.

Conclusion

Drawing on current theories of vulnerability and care ethics, this reading of Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo* has addressed the ways in which the novel's "politics of intimacy" (Barry) challenges the norms and values of individualism within our competitive world (present in Peter's obsession to maintain a reputation as a prestigious, morally impeccable barrister), as well as the gender stereotypes (Margaret's anxieties about the age gap between her and Ivan, and how others will judge her), and social class divides (how money creates a strange aura around Naomi and Peter's relationship) that still today provoke much conflict, prejudice, and misunderstanding. In the depiction of her characters' "radical intimacies," Rooney articulates positive representations of the openness and receptivity of the so-called "vulnerability of the self" (Gilson 47), which ultimately allows protagonists to construct and embrace a mutually supportive sense of care and interdependency within their closest relationships. In *Intermezzo*, intimacy fosters mutual understanding and self-growth,[14] and this is conveyed through a close third person narrative that concentrates on the protagonists' interiority, bodily sensations, and feelings of proximity toward their significant others. Personal transformation is foregrounded in scenes where the "invisible force or energy" of intimacy, an important source of "vitality and well-being," finds expression in a kind of "bodymind" language, of physical and emotional connection (Nishida 22–24). In this process, thanks to the unfettered, "radical" sense of intimacy they build together, Rooney's protagonists manage to reorient their views and priorities away from the conventional values, social prejudice and moral standards of today's neoliberal, patriarchal world.

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[14] This is particularly the case for Peter, Ivan, and Margaret, because the narrative is focalised through these three characters. Sylvia and Naomi, on the other hand, are only seen and described from Peter's external perspective.

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