

?Not Like Normal People?: Samuel Richardson?s Clarissa and Sally Rooney?s Normal People

When Sally Rooney?s slim but ferociously successful study of two sensitive young lovers, *Normal People* came out in 2018, no-one immediately compared it with Samuel Richardson?s *Clarissa* (1747-8), the longest novel in English and still one of the best. Rooney?s novel is after all accessible and deceptively lightweight. If you take three days over it you are probably up to too many other things. Richardson relates the events of eleven months in a cool million words, unfolding them in something like real time (?artificial reality? Hazlitt called it). Though only the toughest survivors of an English course get through *Clarissa* at full length, the plot, of a rascal simultaneously falling in love with and destroying the girl he should have married, is simple enough, and eerily resembles Rooney?s, in which the male partner Connell always deserts Marianne when she most needs saving from herself. Both are quiet novels, diversified by abrupt crashes of melodrama and violence. Lovelace, posing as a man-of-the-world, helps deliver the ?divine? but unappreciated Clarissa from her ogre-siblings, much as Connell rescues Marianne from her ?weird? mother and brutally embittered brother. The lovers in both books try not to think of one another. It proves as easy as not thinking of elephants. All four protagonists are poor little rich kids, three cushioned by wealth and Connell, the only one from the wrong side of the tracks, by literary talent, scholarship pay-outs, and the discovery - the others knew it all along - that money is so ?corrupt and sexy?. Both girls indulge a masochistic streak whenever they feel ?damaged? (this is a concern in both Rooney?s novels so far), leading Marianne to ask the terrible rhetorical question: ?Is the world such an evil place, that love should be indistinguishable from the basest and most abusive forms of violence?? Both girls focus obsessively on what they fear may be bad things about themselves, on something people in their circle, especially men, may wish to dominate. Clarissa, who faces the appalling aftermath of sexual assault, spends much of the last phase of the novel trying to bolster her self-esteem in the corrosive humility of a Puritan deathbed. Marianne?s self-hatred slims her into a sleek plaything for sadistic sexual partners. Both Lovelace and Connell listen obsessively to the objects of their obsession, but never quite ?hear them right.?

There are huge differences in time and place, of course. Rooney sets her novel in a Eurocentric Ireland, where nobody sweats about Mass any more, and youth is viewed as a kind of (dangerous) theme-park. Clarissa?s world coincides with the second Jacobite Rebellion, the last flourish in a long Civil War between her tribe (mercantile Puritans) and Lovelace?s (idle Cavaliers). Sexual temperatures are different too. Marianne and Connell fall in and out of bed more easily than they exchange coherent sentences. Connell is an impeccable consort for the #MeToo moment, in that he unequivocally asks consent before taking Marianne?s virginity, and even before asking her for a naked selfie. Lovelace, as bound up in ideas of the Cavalier libertine as Connell is in contemporary ideas of male ?wise passiveness?, thinks he must control his ?charmer? by seizing her virginity, losing her in the process, and losing himself in the sordid stereotype of Restoration Rake. It is not clear until late in the novels whether Connell is wise to be so gentle, or how suicidal was Lovelace?s choice to be so cruel. But these, though no doubt compelling differences on first reading, are contrasts of context, not emotional logic. Both novels are clearly about the psychology of sex. Both have been criticised as ?semi-pornographic?, especially when transferred to television. They are two of

the most intense realisations of the pain of love in the language.

Both Richardson and Rooney have chosen one of the subtlest and most productive formats for their version of the 'literary' romance. The conventional rom-com starts when Beatrice and Benedick, or Elizabeth and Darcy, if you will, think they can't bear the sight of one another, but learn that contempt is merely curable self-deception. In Rooney and Richardson the lovers are enchanted with their other selves from first contact, divining in them complementarity and even completeness, but forced by the perversity of life (or the novel form) never to admit they are a plausible 'couple'. Clarissa and Lovelace are classic lovers who cannot bring their love to life: ultimately Lovelace's violence and Clarissa's independence make marriage impossible. Time and again in Rooney's quietly emphatic novel Marianne discovers a streak of self-hatred that Connell will never punish or exploit; whereas Connell cannot lose his writer's detachment for full immersion in the magic of Marianne, or in existence itself, possibly. Save for her, 'he's not comfortable confiding in others, or demanding things from them.' In both novels the reader is taught to root for consummation, but is convinced that the territory of the great book, in the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries alike, is the quiet desperation of past mistakes and lost possibilities, many of them self-induced.

Why do we find these people so fascinating? No-one absorbs or challenges Clarissa like Lovelace. She looks back every step she runs away from him. The glowing isolation of Marianne and Connell cannot match those semi-conscious moans of perfect coupling. These people ought to wind up together, but end up separated by the Irish land-mass, or the waters of the English Channel Lovelace must cross to fight his fatal duel, when Clarissa's family take his life for his crimes against Clarissa.

Richardson writes his novel in letters, the most laborious of all novelistic methods, but still in some ways the most immediate: 'writing to the moment?', he called it. Most of the novel consists of letters written by the protagonists, placing us if not quite in their heads then beside their inkwell, and in personal letters (unless you are deliberately trying to deceive) you grapple with the truth and your deepest concerns, even if you can't fully articulate them. Rooney doesn't use letters, or skype, or text message, though there were lots of these in her first novel, *Conversations with Friends*. She doesn't even insert too many emails, though Connell apparently regales Marianne with more crafted emails than we are shown. He feels however, that a story in emails, the exact equivalent of Richardson's method, would be 'gimmicky'. Instead Rooney confines her unobtrusive narrator to the historic present (like reading letters) always letting Marianne or Connell focalise their thoughts, so that in some ways the effect is just as emotionally self-contained as Richardson: the cover of the Faber edition shows them snogging in a sardine tin. Both novels date their letters and chapters meticulously. Sometimes the ominous forward march of time is kicked into touch by memory, but not for long: 'Time consists of physics?', as Marianne says. What should be a charismatic setting (Sligo, the ground of many of W.B. Yeats's poems) becomes less familiar than the inside of the lovers' duvet. Similarly Richardson does without the panorama of England in the 1740s, so vibrant in Fielding's exactly contemporary novel, *Tom Jones*. Temporary friends, gangs of lads, predatory siblings dwindle to background presences, the action hovering resolutely in the characters' heads, as if they were living a dream, or half-watching, half-living lives lived in slow-motion. Both books are, of course, solidly specified. The scenes in which Trinity College, Dublin out-Oxbridges Oxbridge, will benefit the Irish Tourist Board. Richardson seems to know more than he should about whore-houses. There are deaths and anniversaries, cleaners and consumption. But the deepest theme of both is the ubiquity and opacity of sex, never the safest moral compass.

At the last gasp, Lovelace has reduced Clarissa to a kind of suicidal piety, while Marianne is convinced she has at least done 'something?' for Connell, but is equally sure he can never do enough for her, except remind her she is a 'good person'. Lovelace and Clarissa are sundered by death, guilt and shame; Connell and Marianne once again embrace opportunities that are sure to lead to separation. The result is two wonderfully anticlimactic books throbbing with the electricity of lives not fully realised, dramatising the perceptible but unparaphraseable swishes of emotion that great writers must confront.

Works Cited

Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* (1748); the BBC [1] adapted the novel as a 3 hour television series [2] in 1991, starring Sean Bean [3], Saskia Wickham [4], Hermione Norris and Sean Pertwee [5]. There have been numerous abridgements and adaptations, including a notable digested version by E.S. Dallas (1868),

Sally Rooney, *Normal People* (Faber and Faber, 2018); the BBC adapted the novel as a 6 hour television series in 2020, starring Paul Mescal and Daisy Edgar-Jones.

William Hazlitt, 'Standard Novels and Romances?' (1815), originally published in *Edinburgh Review*, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed., P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London: J.M. Dent, 1931), xvi, 6

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[2] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clarissa_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clarissa_(TV_series))

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sean_Bean

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saskia_Wickham

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sean_Pertwee