Utrecht University

Narrating Irish Identity and Intimacy: Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2021) and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018)

MA Thesis Literature Today: English and Comparative Literature Track
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18th of June, 2025
Word count: 9719 (excl. abstract)

Abstract

This thesis explores how Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2021) and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) represent Irish identity and emotional intimacy. Although Keegan and Rooney differ in style, setting, and tone, both authors investigate how private emotional life is shaped by collective histories and cultural transformation. Keegan's fiction revisits the moral silences of 1980s Ireland, particularly around the Magdalene Laundries, while Rooney's narrative unfolds in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger crash, portraying the disorientation of a generation shaped by economic instability and emotional disconnection. The thesis argues that through contrasting but complementary narrative strategies, Keegan and Rooney examine intimacy as an ethical practice and Irishness as a lived, affective experience. Rather than relying on explicit historical exposition or national symbolism, both authors embed questions of morality and identity into atmosphere, dialogue, and the subtleties of everyday relationships. By reading their work through the frameworks of cultural memory and ethics of care, this study demonstrates how contemporary Irish literature registers national legacies not only in memory, but in feeling. Ultimately, this comparative approach shows that Keegan and Rooney present fiction as a space for ethical reflection and emotional depth, redefining its role in contemporary Irish culture beyond traditional frameworks of national identity. Their work highlights how moral action and cultural belonging emerge not through resolution, but through sustained attention to the complexities of intimacy, complicity, and care. In doing so, they offer insight into how Irish literature speaks to both its national past and a broader, shared condition of uncertainty.

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Context and Purpose

Since the early 2010s, Irish fiction has experienced renewed global prominence, with writers such as Claire Keegan and Sally Rooney emerging as defining voices of twenty-first-century literature. Their works, *Small Things Like These* (2021) and *Normal People* (2018), have received both critical and popular acclaim, with notable recognition such as Booker Prize nominations, highlighting their influence in the literary world while reflecting Ireland's evolving cultural territory. These novels were chosen for this thesis because they offer distinct yet complementary explorations of Irish identity and emotional intimacy. Although stylistically distinct, both authors interrogate fundamental aspects of Irishness: how the nation remembers its past, how people connect emotionally, and how individuals navigate complex moral choices shaped by Ireland's historical and cultural context. This thesis argues that Claire Keegan and Sally Rooney, through their respective narrative strategies, examine Irish identity and emotional intimacy in ways that resonate with both domestic and international readers. By analyzing these themes through the lenses of cultural memory and moral life, the study shows how their fiction reimagines the role of contemporary Irish literature; not through overt national narratives, but through subtle emotional and ethical textures that reflect the complexities of the present moment.

Literary Profiles

Keegan and Rooney contribute differently to the contemporary Irish literary tradition. Keegan's fiction is marked by minimalism and a deep concern for ethical action. *Small Things Like These*, set in a small Irish town in 1985, follows Bill Furlong, a coal merchant who uncovers the ongoing abuse within a local Magdalene Laundry. These institutions, run

by Catholic religious orders, confined so-called “fallen women’’–often for years of unpaid labor under harsh and abusive conditions (“Magdalene Laundry”). Faced with the decision of whether to intervene, Furlong’s quiet resistance becomes a meditation on complicity, care, and courage. Keegan’s prose is spare yet emotionally resonant, drawing the reader into a world where much is left unsaid–but powerfully felt. Her work draws attention to how collective silences and institutional histories shape not only national identity but the most intimate corners of personal life.

Rooney, meanwhile, is often described as the “the first great millennial author” and is known for her psychologically acute and socially nuanced portrayals of contemporary relationships (Barry). *Normal People* follows Connell and Marianne, two teenagers from County Sligo, as they navigate love, class divisions, and self-understanding from secondary school into early adulthood. Rooney’s stripped-back prose and sharp interiority foreground emotional disconnection and generational unease. Her characters experience Irishness not through direct engagement with national history, but through the more nuanced perspectives of class, mental health, and romantic uncertainty. Rooney’s portrayal of Ireland is less overt and more subtly shaped by post-crash disillusionment, neoliberal drift, and a pervasive sense of emotional instability.

Thematic Focus and Method

This thesis analyzes how Keegan and Rooney engage with two interrelated thematic concerns: Irish identity as it is shaped by cultural memory, and intimacy as an ethical practice. It examines how both authors, who rarely appear together in scholarly discourse, construct moral and national identity not through overt exposition or political commentary, but through tone, atmosphere, and the texture of everyday interaction. Special attention is given to narrative form and affect, focusing on how historical and ethical meaning is

conveyed through silences, spatial dynamics, and emotional interactions. In doing so, the study highlights the subtle, often understated ways in which fiction can register the complexities of collective memory and relational ethics.

Chapter Overview

The first chapter argues that Keegan and Rooney frame Irishness as a historically contingent and emotionally mediated experience. While Keegan returns to the symbolic and material residues of institutional Ireland, Rooney depicts a post-institutional, emotionally disoriented generation. Cultural memory manifests not only in content but in mood and form: through Keegan's haunted realism and Rooney's minimalist ambiguity.

Chapter Two extends this inquiry to the ethics of intimacy. In *Small Things Like These*, moral clarity emerges through small acts of care and risk in a world structured by denial. In *Normal People*, intimacy is fragile, recursive, and often obstructed, where connection is sustained through emotional effort rather than resolution. Both authors portray intimacy as a space where larger cultural forces are acutely felt and ethically negotiated.

Contribution to the Field

By pairing Keegan and Rooney, this thesis offers not only a comparative analysis of two major contemporary Irish writers, but a methodological framework for reading national literature through the lens of affect, relational ethics, and cultural memory. Their juxtaposition highlights how contemporary Irish fiction speaks in distinct but thematically resonant registers to grapple with the same unresolved inheritance.

This comparative approach highlights insights that may have remained obscured in isolated readings: the subtle moral textures of Rooney's ambivalence, and the emotional undercurrents of Keegan's restraint. It shows that contemporary Irish literature increasingly engages with history and identity not through grand national narratives, but through the subtle

details of ordinary life. Keegan and Rooney demonstrate that the legacy of Ireland's past is not only preserved in cultural memory but felt in the emotional atmosphere of relationships; through silence, hesitation, and care. While deeply rooted in the Irish context, their fiction resonates more broadly by illustrating how ethical responsibility and historical consciousness are often negotiated not through public discourse, but through the intimate and ethically charged terrain of everyday human connection.

Chapter 1: Irishness and Cultural Memory

Irish Identity and Cultural Memory in Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* and Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

Irishness, as a literary and cultural identity, has undergone significant redefinition in the context of Ireland's late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century transformations – including the decline of Catholic authority, the revelations surrounding institutional abuse, the Celtic Tiger boom and bust, and the growing influence of globalisation. As Falci and Reynolds observe, "contemporary Irish writing has taken a global turn while remaining keyed to local conditions and events," a dynamic that reflects the nation's effort to "represent, as well as to intervene in, the rapidly changing contemporary conditions in which it is produced" (16, 1).

The fiction of Claire Keegan and Sally Rooney reflects two markedly different modes of engaging with Irish identity. Keegan evokes an intimate connection with Ireland's rural past and its Catholic legacy, rendering the nation through local detail and institutional memory. Rooney, by contrast, operates in a more transnational mode, embedding Irishness subtly within the emotional landscapes of globalised youth culture, elite academic institutions, and shifting class dynamics. Through the lens of Cultural Memory Theory, this chapter explores how both authors engage with national memory; its presence, distortion, and continuity–as a central component of identity formation and reader response.

Cultural memory, as defined by Astrid Erll, is particularly useful for analyzing contemporary representations of Irishness because it foregrounds how identity is shaped not only by what is actively remembered, but also by the structures and media through which memory is transmitted. It provides a framework for understanding how literature encodes historical knowledge not only through content, but through narrative form, atmosphere, and

affective experience. Erll describes cultural memory as "the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts," a process mediated by institutions, practices, and symbolic forms that encode and reproduce historical meaning (2). Literature, she argues, is one of the most powerful of these symbolic forms, as it participates in the "meaning-making process" that shapes how cultures remember their past and understand their present (Erll 335). Both Keegan and Rooney, in their respective ways, contribute to this process. They engage in what Erll calls the dynamics of memory culture, where literature becomes not a passive reflection of history, but an active site for interpreting, reframing, and emotionally working through collective experiences (5).

Small Things Like These, Irish Identity, and Cultural Memory in Post-Catholic Ireland

Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* is deeply embedded in the moral atmosphere of post-Catholic Ireland, a moment in which collective reckoning with the Church's authority had begun, yet was still largely submerged. Set in the 1980s, the novella inhabits a threshold period: public trust in the Catholic Church was beginning to fray, but the mechanisms of silence and complicity remained culturally dominant. As Falci and Reynolds detail, "Long the arbiter of morality for Irish citizens, the Catholic Church in Ireland was exposed during these decades as systematically failing to protect its constituents and enabling the abuse of its most vulnerable subjects" (5). Institutions such as the Magdalene Laundries, mother and baby homes, and industrial schools had, for decades, operated with state collusion and little scrutiny. These "shocking systemic failures and their devastating consequences have altered the ideological underpinnings of Irish society," sparking a "grappling with the past and its seeming sureties" (Falci and Reynolds 5, 6). Only in the early 2000s did a sustained public reckoning take place, with survivor testimonies and state reports–such as the Ryan and Ferns Reports–making visible what had long been privately known or collectively repressed. As

Falci and Reynolds argue, “some of the most important texts to emerge in this period have been not works of literature but governmental reports,” which require the same critical scrutiny and emotional engagement as creative writing to understand “the complexities of lived experience within systems that are unjust and oppressive” (6). Keegan’s novella, in this sense, contributes to this broader cultural movement of memory and moral accountability, rendering silence itself as a historical and emotional burden. making visible what had long been privately known or collectively repressed.

Cultural memory theorist Astrid Erll writes that “it is decisive to investigate the extent to which the changed historical context conditions individual memory and how pronounced and intricate the relationship between public memory and private memory is” (129). This insight is crucial for reading Keegan’s work: *Small Things Like These* functions as both a character-driven narrative and a form of literary counter-memory, a quiet but forceful intervention in how Ireland remembers its institutional past. Rather than passively reflecting history, Keegan’s fiction actively engages with the structures of remembrance, shaping how readers confront and emotionally navigate buried cultural traumas.

This is especially relevant in the Irish context, where national memory has long been mediated through the institutions of the nation-state–especially the Church, which operated as a co-articulator of national identity throughout the 20th century. The erosion of that authority–both real and symbolic–has made literature an increasingly vital site of mnemonic work. In this context, *Small Things Like These* functions as a form of witness literature, which I define as fiction that subtly engages with silenced historical events, inviting readers to feel their emotional weight and reflect on their ethical implications. Her novella does not name the Magdalene Laundries outright, but it summons their presence through silence, implication, and the reader’s interpretive memory. What’s at stake, then, is not merely

Furlong's moral decision, but how that decision reanimates–and critiques–a broader national silence.

The Persistence of the Irish Past

Claire Keegan's fiction is steeped in what Pierre Nora would call *lieux de mémoire*—"sites of memory"—textual and symbolic spaces where cultural identity is preserved and continually reshaped (Nora, qtd. in Erll and Nünning, 19–20). In *Small Things Like These*, the seemingly unremarkable Irish small town becomes such a site: a setting where memory is not overtly named but is embedded in the physical, emotional, and moral landscape of everyday life. Though set in the 1980s, the novella derives its force from its quiet confrontation with Ireland's suppressed histories–particularly the Catholic Church's role in institutional abuse. The story never states these histories outright, but they are present in every interaction, gesture, and silence. I argue that this is not memory in a declarative sense, but memory as atmosphere – an affective presence that shapes how both characters and readers move through the world of the novella.

From the outset, the novella invites readers to inhabit a world steeped in cultural amnesia and moral uncertainty. The protagonist, Bill Furlong, encounters a young girl imprisoned in a convent laundry – dirty, barefoot, and trembling in the cold. His slow moral awakening, as he grapples with whether to intervene or remain complicit, unfolds against a backdrop of normalized cruelty. It is not merely a personal dilemma; it is a moment where private conscience collides with the collective silence of a society unwilling to see. Keegan offers this tension with deliberate understatement, allowing the ethical stakes to emerge through detail rather than declaration. When Furlong sees the girl, "just about fit to stand, with her hair roughly cut," he is struck by a wave of aversion and doubt: "the ordinary part of him wished he'd never come near the place" (Keegan 59). Later, as he shines his torch on her

feet and sees “the long toenails, black from the coal,” and she remains silent, he “felt something of what she must be feeling” but can find no words of comfort (Keegan 60–61). The moment is quietly devastating, intensified by the nun’s calm indifference to the girl’s condition: “You’ve had a fright, is all. What you need now is your breakfast and a good, long sleep.” (Keegan 69). As Renate Lachmann observes, literature is a site of active memory-work, where “mnemic imagination and poetic imagination interact” (Lachmann, qtd. in Erll and Nünning, 303), and *Small Things Like These* exemplifies this process: its power lies in its ability to transform historical silence into an emotional and ethical encounter. The novella does not merely recall the trauma of institutional abuse; it reactivates it in the reader’s imagination. The image of the girl’s frozen, purple feet, bare against the stone floor while the nun remains unmoved becomes a point of affective rupture. The reader, like Furlong, is placed within the scene and asked to respond. The narrative does not allow moral distance; it triggers recognition. This is the function of what Erll and others call the “mnemonic imagination,” a process by which literature mirrors, reframes, and enables the processing of cultural trauma through affective engagement (Erll 303).

Keegan’s prose, while restrained, creates an environment saturated with moral memory, which I define as the lingering emotional and ethical imprint of collective pasts on individual perception and behavior. As Furlong moves through the town—past the church, the convent, the homes of his clients—the reader moves with him through a landscape that is both literal and symbolic. These spaces serve as what Erll, following classical mnemotechnics, describes as memory-inducing sites: “The images are registered in the mnemonic space–just as letters are scratched into a writing tablet” (303). The town is not just a setting; it is a mnemonic map, which can be explained as a spatial network in which physical locations are infused with the residues of cultural memory. As Erll and Neumann note, cultural memory often manifests in literature through “semanticized forms, ” meaning

that plot, setting, and imagery work together to convey culture-specific modes of remembrance (335). Keegan's narrative then exemplifies this structure: the church represents moral authority and silence; the convent, institutional control and hidden suffering; Furlong's clients' homes embody varying degrees of complicity and comfort. Together, these everyday spaces encode social norms–deference to clerical power, the pursuit of respectability, and the habit of looking away, while also bearing the buried histories of abuse and neglect. As Erll argues, literature can shape cultural memory by "symbolically transforming" historical trauma into shared meaning (335), offering readers not only a representation of the past, but an affective framework through which to confront it. In *Small Things Like These*, this transformation occurs quietly but powerfully: memory is not announced, but felt. Furlong's own reflections, such as when he reminds himself that "people could be good" (Keegan 91), become more than memories; they are catalysts for moral action, structured by both individual conscience and collective inheritance.

In doing so, the story contributes to the evolving cultural repertoire of remembrance in post-Catholic Ireland. The novella does not offer redemption, but it does offer recognition. In the space of a quiet Christmas Eve, Keegan collapses the distance between private memory and public trauma, between past injustice and present reckoning.

To develop this argument further, I want to turn more closely to the novel's affective resonance; how Keegan crafts emotional texture through space, routine, and quiet sensory detail. *Small Things Like These* unfolds with a quiet intensity, grounded in its capacity to evoke a specifically Irish atmosphere that feels intimate, lived-in, and emotionally legible. The setting is never overexplained, but its resonance builds through layered, sensory cues. Early on, Keegan writes, "The people, for the most part, unhappily endured the weather: shopkeepers and tradesmen, men and women in the post office and the dole queue, the mart, the coffee shop and supermarket, the bingo hall, the pubs and the chipper all commented, in

their own ways, on the cold and what rain had fallen" (Keegan 1). This ordinary moment sets the tone for a world shaped by habit and shared experience. Keegan's portrayal of Irishness operates on two levels: it invites interpretation through symbolic and historical cues, while also allowing readers to inhabit it through atmosphere, routine, and affect. As Furlong moves through his town, the places he passes act less as narrative sites than as memory-laden fixtures of Irish life. These spaces quietly encode the cultural memory of the 1980s, shaped by institutions and the silences surrounding them. As Miriam Haughton et al. note in *Legacies of the Magdalen Laundries*, buildings associated with institutional life, especially convents, are not just historical structures, but "sites of human rights abuses, a site and history which remain largely uninvestigated, unresolved, and in many contexts unacknowledged" (17). Keegan captures this "unacknowledged" presence through subtle affective cues: a glance at the tall convent gate or the weight of Furlong's unease as he moves through the town. These locations, ordinary and institutional alike, do not overtly declare themselves as cultural symbols, yet they carry the emotional charge of national history. The reader does not need to analyze these spaces as overt symbols of national trauma; rather, their significance emerges through mood, memory, and emotional suggestion.

Rather than stage Irishness as a theme, Keegan embeds it in tone, geography, and repetition. Her writing becomes a kind of cultural shorthand. Readers do not need an index of institutional abuses to understand the girl's condition when she appears barefoot and trembling in the coal shed. The emotional charge of the scene relies on both exposition and affective atmosphere. As Cantueso Urbano and Romero Ruiz note, such scenes draw their power from the physical and the unspeakable, reflecting how trauma survivors are unable "to recollect their memories and put them into words" (57). Keegan's stripped-back language mirrors this dynamic, translating cultural trauma into a form readers can feel without requiring historical fluency. The girl's silence, in particular, becomes a conduit for this

affective tension: "'What's going on here at all?' Furlong said. When the girl again said nothing he again grasped emptily for something to say" (Keegan 61). The lack of dialogue does not indicate a lack of meaning; rather, it amplifies the emotional weight of the scene through what remains unsaid.

The seasonal setting deepens this affective resonance. The narrative is steeped in winter rituals: lighting the fire, creaming butter, preparing for the holidays. These familiar moments are not nostalgic flourishes, but emotional anchors. The domestic space becomes a recognizable emotional territory that heightens the unease of what lies outside it. As Madalina Armie argues in her reading of *Walk the Blue Fields*, Keegan's rural landscapes function as "a bridge between the realities of tradition and contemporaneity," capturing the tensions between "romantic Ireland," built on religious conservatism and patriarchal norms, and "Celtic Tiger Ireland," marked by secularism and shifting social values (87). While Armie focuses on an earlier story by Keegan, the same structural tension underpins *Small Things Like These*: its 1980s setting feels both suspended in time and newly urgent, presenting a world where cultural continuity masks ethical dissonance. Keegan's rural town, like her broader fictional Ireland, becomes a microcosm of a nation in quiet crisis–where the past has merely gone underground.

This same affective subtlety also shapes Keegan's portrayal of cultural silences. The townspeople's quiet acceptance of the convent's authority is neither condemned nor defended. It is simply there, a facet of social life that reflects institutional reverence, moral fatigue, and learned helplessness. These silences are not unique to Ireland, but they resonate in its context, where public deference and private discomfort have long coexisted.

At the same time, Keegan's Ireland is not a generic backdrop but a world shaped by a particular moment of cultural suspension–a town caught between fading tradition and emerging awareness. The convent's looming presence and the townspeople's evasions

suggest that the past, though unspoken, remains structurally embedded. Forgetting here is not absence but atmosphere. This aligns with theoretical readings of Keegan's work as memory literature: where cultural memory theory highlights how plot, space, and image construct national remembrance, *Small Things Like These* shows how these elements can operate below the level of theme. The girl's body, the cold, the locked shed; such details carry a moral and emotional weight that is distinctly Irish yet broadly resonant, grounding national trauma in affective, universally legible form.

In this way, *Small Things Like These* achieves a balance. It reflects Ireland's cultural and historical textures through prose that is accessible, emotional, and grounded in the material. Keegan's Irishness is not loudly stated but gently and powerfully felt. The novella resonates because it reframes national identity not as political message or historical record, but as emotional residue–something carried in buildings, in silence, and in gesture. Like Rooney's Ireland, Keegan's is one that allows readers to enter, to pause, and to feel what lingers.

Normal People, Irish Identity, and Cultural Memory in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland

In contrast to Claire Keegan's historical lens, Sally Rooney's *Normal People* reflects the socio-economic legacy of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. The country's rapid economic expansion in the late 1990s and early 2000s culminated in a catastrophic financial crash in 2008. The aftermath left a generation facing deep disillusionment: unemployment, emigration, housing insecurity, and the erosion of public trust became defining features of young adult life. Rooney's characters rarely speak explicitly about these political or economic forces, but they are unmistakably shaped by them. Connell's financial anxiety, his self-consciousness about class, and his uncertainty about the future reflect the broader social trauma of an upward mobility that is neither stable nor emotionally sustaining.

Importantly, this discomfort is not delivered through overt exposition but conveyed in Rooney's restrained prose and the emotional texture of her characters' inner lives. Connell's sense of shame, for instance, is not declared but emerges through gesture, silence, and self-censorship. Rooney's fiction offers these micro-level moments as sites where the affective residues of a national economic collapse are quietly transmitted.

Unlike Keegan, as discussed earlier in this chapter, who highlights repressed institutional guilt and ethical failure through minimalist prose and concentrated symbolism, Rooney engages with a contemporary grammar of emotional ambiguity and structural uncertainty. Where Keegan's narratives invite readers into an atmosphere of quiet moral urgency, Rooney's are less about definitive ethical judgments and more about navigating ambivalence–emotional, romantic, economic, and cultural.

This tonal and thematic shift, from moral clarity and institutional critique to emotional complexity and individual uncertainty, reflects a broader transformation in Irish cultural memory and literary sensibility. While Keegan began publishing in the 1990s, her *Small Things Like These* revisits the institutional abuses of an earlier Ireland; Rooney, writing in the wake of the 2008 crash, depicts a generation shaped less by Church or State than by neoliberal precarity and emotional disorientation. If earlier fiction aimed to reckon with the legacy of powerful institutions–the Church, the family, the State–then Rooney's work traces the aftershocks of economic instability and social atomization. As Erll writes, "literature is therefore never a simple reflection of pre-existing cultural discourses; rather, it proactively contributes to the negotiation of cultural memory" (335). Rooney's sparse style and attention to interiority do not only mirror emotional disaffection; they actively shape how readers absorb and internalize contemporary Irishness. Her novels suggest that national identity is no longer grounded in shared myth or collective trauma, but in the fragile, often fractured textures of daily life in a society no longer sure of its future. These micro-expressions of

anxiety, distance, and emotional detachment form a literary record of what it means to live in Ireland after the crash–between prosperity's promise and its withdrawal.

The Ambivalence of Irishness

If Keegan's fiction insists on confronting Ireland's institutional past, Rooney's work suggests that contemporary Irishness is experienced as ambivalence–emotional, spatial, and social. In *Normal People*, national identity is not expressed through direct engagement with historical trauma, but filtered through class difference, internal migration, and the subtle ruptures of everyday life. Connell, a working-class student from Sligo, enters Trinity College Dublin and becomes increasingly alienated in its elite academic environment. Marianne, his wealthier counterpart, is socially fluent in Dublin's intellectual circles but feels out of place in her rural hometown. Both characters oscillate between insider and outsider status, showing that emotional and geographic dislocation is central to Rooney's portrayal of Ireland.

Connell's experience of cultural exile is conveyed through emotionally candid dialogue and small, revealing remarks that expose the social and cultural hierarchies embedded in everyday life. At one point, he notes that his university peers "often mention the West of Ireland as if it's a foreign country" (Rooney 69), a throwaway comment that underscores the internal hierarchies of national identity, where class and geography delineate cultural belonging. His discomfort is not dramatized through overt confrontation but emerges in silences, hesitations, and passing remarks. In conversation with his therapist Gillian, Connell admits: "I probably thought if I moved here I would fit in better… But honestly, the people here are a lot worse than the people I knew in school. I mean everyone here just goes around comparing how much money their parents make" (Rooney 217). These understated revelations build a portrait of Irishness that is fractured, uncertain, and socially stratified. The novel does not reject Irish identity outright, but reconfigures it through contrasts; between

Sligo and Dublin, rootedness and mobility, familial intimacy and elite exclusion. These ambient pressures, social, psychological, and economic, culminate in Connell's depressive episode, which functions as both narrative and symbolic climax. Telling his therapist, "I feel like I left Carricklea thinking I could have a different life. But I hate it here, and now I can never go back" (Rooney 217), Connell maps emotional collapse onto cultural dislocation. As aforementioned, literature can shape cultural memory by "symbolically transforming" historical trauma into shared meaning (Erll 335). In this light, the university and the city do not merely frame Connell's experience but participate in that transformation; becoming charged spaces where personal distress mirrors broader patterns of cultural fragmentation and memory. His depression is not only an internal crisis but a manifestation of wider cultural discontinuity.

Rooney's fiction then participates in the cultural memory of post-crash Ireland not by offering moral clarity, but by staging its uncertainties. Her characters are haunted less by historical trauma than by contemporary drift–by what it means to come of age in a society where identity, connection, and meaning feel perpetually deferred. Irishness, in *Normal People*, is neither fully rejected nor nostalgically reclaimed; it is lived.

While the previous section explored how *Normal People* reconfigures Irish identity through emotional and spatial ambivalence, this section delves further into Rooney's portrayal of Irishness as an affective terrain shaped by dislocation, class, and silence. Her restrained narrative, rooted in post-crash Ireland and shaped by economic insecurity and emotional detachment, reflects national dislocation while also presenting affective experiences that resonate across social and geographic boundaries. Irishness here emerges not as ideological stance, but as emotional texture–a form that is locally grounded and yet broadly legible.

As aforementioned, Rooney's characters experience class, shame, and dislocation not through nationalist rhetoric, but through minimalist prose and emotional gaps. As María Amor Barros-Del Río argues in "Sally Rooney's *Normal People*: The Millennial Novel of Formation in Recessionary Ireland", Rooney's fiction epitomises "twenty-first-century Irish writers' response to 'the chaos and intensity of the contemporary… as a moment of acceleration and flux'" (Reynolds, qtd. in Barros-Del Río 178). In *Normal People*, this flux is then reflected in Connell's psychological instability as discussed before, particularly his oscillation between rural rootedness and urban alienation. While this dislocation operates as a form of cultural memory, its impact lies in how it is emotionally embodied: registered in small gestures and unresolved conversations.

Rooney positions her protagonists not as historical representatives, but as millennial subjects navigating intimacy and shifting cultural norms. When Marianne reflects, "Most people go through their whole lives… without ever really feeling that close with anyone" (37), the line crystallises the novel's emotional core: intimacy as both crisis and consolation in a world marked by drift. It is not only an expression of personal loneliness but a symptom of broader emotional disorientation. Irishness here becomes what Sean O'Neill describes as "a warped sense of distance"; a geography of feeling rather than fixed identity, where "moving between [Mayo and Dublin]… always involves moving across a whole island, in all its cultural differences." Rooney's Ireland emerges through subtle emotional dislocation, where national identity is felt through private tension rather than public narrative.

This interplay between national specificity and emotional resonance is especially visible in the "ghost estate" scene; one of the few explicit markers of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. As Connell and Marianne walk through an unfinished housing development, a relic of the property crash, Connell asks: "Why don't they give them away if they can't sell them?" Marianne replies: "It's something to do with capitalism" (Rooney 34). Their vague, almost

comic exchange reflects what Will Fleming identifies as Rooney's concern with the "void between political theory and lived experience." The ruined housing estate is both a literal space and a symbolic remnant, one the characters cannot fully interpret. It renders Ireland's recent past as residue, emotionally sensed but not intellectually resolved.

This vagueness is not a flaw but a narrative mode. As Alicia Muro observes, Rooney's protagonists are "damaged," surrounded by a "halo of (ab)normality" that makes their pain feel familiar and immediate (103). Marianne's self-loathing—"I don't know why I can't be like normal people" (Rooney 181)—draws on post-Catholic shame, class marginality, and emotional suppression. Yet it is not resolved through backstory or diagnosis. Instead, Rooney reflects what Muro calls a "silencing of shame and trauma" (106), abstracting specific histories into affective traces. In contrast to Keegan, who demands historical recognition, Rooney translates Irish experience into an emotional condition: subtle, fractured, and often unnamed.

Still, as Sean O'Neill argues in his article on Rooney's overlooked national context, her fiction is rooted in a distinct place: "Sally Rooney is Irish." This assertion is not merely biographical but critical. Building on this, I argue that her work, while globally resonant, is embedded in the textures of Irish life. It does not reject its national grounding but filters it through relationships, setting, and mood. Keegan names time and place, foregrounding moral dilemmas within institutions, whereas Rooney embeds them in conversation and miscommunication. Connell's mental health crisis, Marianne's withdrawal from her family, and their mutual hesitations enact a form of remembering that unfolds through absence, silence, and unresolved emotion. These qualities root Rooney's fiction in the emotional and psychic legacies of Irish modernity, even when it appears globally diffuse. Rooney's treatment of movement and estrangement further reflects this form of contemporary Irishness. The novel's internal migrations–from Carricklea to Dublin, Dublin to New York–map shifts

not only in geography but in identity. Rooney's Ireland is a place to leave, a site of emotional and cultural departure that offers no clear arrival elsewhere. As Barros-Del Río notes, *Normal People* "alters the morphology of the traditional Bildung form" (178), offering no trajectory of maturation or resolution. Instead, it presents the uneasy coexistence of ambition, guilt, and isolation–a condition that is socially and culturally specific, yet affectively recognizable across contexts.

Ultimately, Claire Keegan and Sally Rooney offer distinct approaches to representing Irishness, shaped by different historical contexts and narrative sensibilities. Keegan confronts the legacy of Ireland's institutional past through spare prose, symbolic spaces, and affective silences, drawing the reader into a narrative environment where cultural memory is embedded in ordinary routines and spaces. Rooney, writing in the aftermath of economic collapse and social flux, focuses on emotional dislocation, class mobility, and interpersonal ambiguity to explore how national identity persists under conditions of uncertainty. While Keegan locates Irishness in the structures and residues of communal memory, Rooney traces its presence in patterns of speech, relationships, and emotional withdrawal. Both writers show that Irishness today is not defined by fixed symbols or explicit themes, but by the changing ways it is registered in experience, shaped by history, and expressed through form.

Chapter 2: Intimacy and Ethical Life

Relational Ethics and Emotional Ambiguity in Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* and Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

If Chapter 1 explored how Irishness is mediated through cultural memory and historical residue, this chapter turns to a related yet distinct concern: the role of intimacy as an ethical mode through which individual lives navigate national histories, social structures, and emotional inheritances. Both Claire Keegan and Sally Rooney explore the moral weight of close relationships–between spouses, friends, parents, and strangers–not as stable refuges from broader cultural forces, but as sites where silence, complicity, care, and recognition unfold.

While Keegan and Rooney write in stylistically and thematically divergent registers, both engage with the legacy of post-Catholic Ireland and its emotional aftermath. Keegan, through her sparse and morally charged prose, stages care within the atmospheric residues of institutional abuse and national silence. Rooney, by contrast, positions intimacy within the emotional ambiguity of a neoliberal present, where identity and care are shaped less by institutional memory than by economic instability, class friction, and personal dislocation. This chapter examines how both writers portray intimacy not simply as a psychological or emotional experience, but as a relational and ethical practice shaped by historical context and cultural expectation.

To do so, I draw on distinct sets of critical frameworks in each case: in reading Keegan, I engage with theories of relational ethics and feminist empathy; in reading Rooney, I turn to scholarship on care ethics and post-feminist gender identity. These different approaches reflect not only the contrasting narrative strategies of each writer, but also the distinct emotional and ethical registers in which their characters operate.

Together, Keegan and Rooney offer two powerful but divergent models for thinking about intimacy in contemporary Irish fiction. For Keegan, intimacy becomes a quiet moral test, shaped by the residues of a Catholic past and the imperative to witness. For Rooney, intimacy is a fragile emotional experiment, marked by misrecognition, structural precarity, and the ongoing labour of care. In both, however, the personal is never separate from the historical or cultural; rather, it is precisely in the most intimate exchanges that the larger forces shaping Irish life are most acutely felt.

Intimacy in Silence: Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*

Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* is a novella that explores the quiet moral crises of ordinary life, focusing on how seemingly small moments of recognition can carry profound ethical weight. Keegan herself insists that *Small Things Like These* is not simply "about" the Magdalene Laundries. Rather, it began, she explains, with an image: "a boy who accompanies his father to deliver a load of coal and finds another boy, much his own age, locked up in the coal shed" ("Claire Keegan on *Small Things Like These*"). This moment of silent witnessing–of seeing but not speaking–became the emotional and narrative seed of the novella. The coalman's internal tension took over, and Keegan became preoccupied with how such knowledge might be carried and absorbed into a life of routine, how it might quietly corrode or reform a man's sense of self.

Keegan's choice of setting is also deliberate. She notes that 1985 marks a period of moral and institutional ambiguity: "Well, it could not have been set after the *Ferns Report* was published, as the Catholic Church had by that time lost much of its power and was collapsing… If it was set in another time, it might not have allowed me to question and criticise the society we ourselves created" ("Claire Keegan on *Small Things Like These*"). The novella's temporality thus functions not as distant historical fiction, but as a critique of

near history–one that asks its readers not simply to reflect, but to reckon with the moral residues of a still-present past.

In this section, I analyze *Small Things Like These* as a narrative of moral awakening structured around quiet domestic intimacy and silent ethical witnessing. Drawing on Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides's reading of the novella as a work of feminist empathy and Elke D'hoker's work on relational ethics, I argue that the novella presents intimacy not as a refuge from moral complexity, but as its very stage–where silence, obligation, and relational risk converge. For Pérez-Vides, Keegan confronts complicity through intimate encounters where empathy is inseparable from a willingness to act. D'hoker similarly emphasizes the emotional resonance of silence in Keegan's fiction—what she calls "the silence between people, and the loneliness between people and the love that is there" (Keegan qtd. in D'hoker 160). These silences are not empty, but sites of ethical tension, where even small gestures of care carry the weight of social defiance.

Intimacy as Moral Reckoning

In *Small Things Like These*, intimacy is cultivated through the sparse and morally fraught exchanges that unfold between characters living within a tightly bound and ideologically constrained Irish society. Keegan places her characters in a world where care is both practiced and withheld, often simultaneously, and where acts of intimacy frequently carry with them the weight of ethical compromise or clarity. Central to this exploration is the relationship between Bill Furlong and his wife Eileen, whose emotional proximity is shaped not only by love or partnership, but by unspoken expectations about duty, community, and Catholic moral order.

At the heart of the novel lies a fundamental tension between emotional closeness and moral action. Bill and Eileen's marriage, although steady and ordinary, is underpinned by a

tacit adherence to social conformity. When Bill recounts that "lately he had begun to wonder what mattered, apart from Eileen and the girls," the reader senses a shift in his orientation, from a life led by routine domesticity toward one increasingly governed by reflection and unease (Keegan 33). This moment underscores how even the most intimate familial relationships are, in Keegan's world, framed by broader moral landscapes–the private space of the home exists in uneasy relation to the public systems of silence and complicity.

Furlong's encounter with the girl imprisoned in the convent–becomes the moment where intimacy and morality collide most forcefully. Sarah's desperate plea, "Mister, won't you help us? [...] Just take me as far as the river, that's all you need do," cuts through the detachment that has structured Furlong's world, demanding from him not only empathy, but recognition of his own capacity for ethical engagement (Keegan 41). As Pérez-Vides observes, this appeal is not simply a call for rescue but a moment "haunting him from then on," triggering an "affective shake" that initiates Furlong's "final empathetic gesture" (14). What follows then, can be interpreted as not a cathartic transformation but a quiet reckoning; Furlong's decision to help Sarah is not animated by an inner movement toward moral intimacy, a recognition that connection demands risk.

The tension between empathy and consequence in *Small Things Like These* is heightened by the emotional distance between Furlong and his wife, Eileen. When he tries to share what he has seen, Eileen's response is not one of empathy, but of protective anxiety: "if we just mind what we have here and stay on the right side of people… none of ours will ever have to endure the likes of what them girls go through" (Keegan 46). Her reaction reflects not indifference, but a fear-driven impulse to preserve the boundaries of their domestic stability. She reminds him, pointedly, that "'tis not one of ours," reinforcing a logic of moral containment that excludes others from their sphere of concern (Keegan 46). Later, this ethos of caution is echoed more explicitly by Mrs Kehoe, who warns Furlong: "'Tis no affair of

mine… but surely you must know these nuns have a finger in every pie… You can't side against one without damaging your chances with the other" (Keegan 94). Her tone is friendly, even familiar, but it cloaks a warning: that survival in this society requires silence and complicity. As Lauren Berlant's theory of "cruel optimism" suggests, such attachments to safety and normalcy often prevent ethical flourishing—"the very object of optimism impedes the subject's own flourishing" (qtd. in Pérez-Vides 12). In Keegan's world, both domestic and communal intimacies are shaped by this logic: they offer care, but also require blindness. For Eileen, love for her family becomes entangled with a refusal to witness the suffering of others—revealing how deeply ethical risk is negotiated, and often avoided, within the structures of intimate life.

Keegan's depiction of Furlong's background deepens the novella's moral complexity. Born to a sixteen-year-old mother and raised by the Protestant Mrs. Wilson, Furlong grows up on the margins of Catholic Ireland—outside its structures, yet still shaped by its silences. The memory of Mrs. Wilson's quiet generosity offers not just comfort, but an alternative ethical model: care rooted in personal responsibility rather than social conformity. This remembered intimacy becomes a moral compass, quietly resisting the institutional indifference that surrounds him. As Vivian Valvano Lynch observes, many of Keegan's adult characters "fail miserably at this basic human charge" to care for the vulnerable, particularly children, often with "catastrophic effects" (Lynch 133). While *Small Things Like These* lacks a conventional parent-child narrative, the brief relationship between Furlong and the girl Sarah momentarily takes on that structure. In their first encounter, he hesitates: "for a good while they waited there in the cold, on the front step," and though he considers taking her with him, "the ordinary part of him simply wanted to be rid of this and get on home" (Keegan 61). His choice to return her to the convent reveals the emotional and social weight of inaction, the quiet force of complicity in everyday life. It is only later that he makes a

different choice. As Elke D'hoker writes of Keegan's other heroines, such small gestures "open up the possibility that action and change, however small, are possible, even within conservative rural communities, seemingly fixed in timeless rituals and rigid habits" (170). In this light, Furlong's eventual defiance is not a dramatic rupture, but a fragile, morally uncertain intervention–shaped by memory, hesitation, and an evolving sense of relational responsibility.

Furlong's quiet movement from complicity toward moral clarity unfolds through emotionally charged yet understated moments, rendered with intimacy through Keegan's use of free indirect discourse. Readers remain closely attuned to his inner life, where the repetition of daily routine gradually gives way to ethical unrest. One evening, exhausted and disillusioned, he wonders, "What was it all for? The work and the constant worry… Might things never change or develop into something else, or new?" (Keegan 32). His question signals more than fatigue; it marks the beginning of a shift, a recognition that the shape of a life is determined not just by habit, but by moral attention. This shift is deepened by his memory of Mrs. Wilson, whose quiet kindness and belief that "small things added up, amount to a life" offer him a counterpoint to the indifference that surrounds him. When he encounters Sarah, barefoot and pleading, "Take me home with you then. I'll work til I drop for ya, sir," he initially falters, retreating behind a sense of familial duty: "Haven't I five girls and a wife at home" (Keegan 41). But by the novella's end, he acts. Rather than returning Sarah to the convent, he walks home with her through the dark streets, carrying the box of shoes and the weight of what he now understands. As he reflects, "the worst that could have happened was also already behind him; the thing not done, which could have been – which he would have had to live with for the rest of his life" (Keegan 109). That knowledge clarifies the stakes: the suffering that awaits him is nothing compared to "what the girl at his side had already endured, and might yet surpass" (Keegan 109-10). The decision to bring Sarah home is not

portrayed as heroic, but as painfully necessary; a moment of moral reckoning shaped by memory, fear, and the refusal to accept silence as safety. Care here is not sentimental; it is difficult, intimate, and risky. And yet, it is the only ethical ground on which Furlong can now stand.

Keegan offers no resolution, only a quiet, morally resonant moment of intimacy. Furlong's gesture is small, but it refuses silence, and in Keegan's moral universe, that refusal is everything. In her own words, Keegan insists she was not "deliberately setting out to write about misogyny or Catholic Ireland," but that she "did want to answer back to the question of why so many people said and did little or nothing" while women and girls suffered ("Claire Keegan on *Small Things Like These*"). That answer is not delivered through polemic or plot resolution but through a single, ethically charged moment of intimacy. In choosing to act, Furlong enacts a refusal–a refusal to remain emotionally and morally disconnected from the suffering that has become background noise in his world.

Keegan's fiction is at its most compelling in its sustained exploration of the interconnection between emotional intimacy and ethical responsibility. Even brief interactions become charged with moral significance, revealing the subtle dynamics of complicity and care that shape the everyday. In *Small Things Like These*, it is these often overlooked gestures that ultimately carry the greatest ethical weight, underscoring how seemingly minor acts can constitute meaningful forms of resistance.

Emotional Ambiguity and the Ethics of Disconnection: Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* explores intimacy as a site of ongoing negotiation—an emotionally charged space where care emerges not as a given but as a fragile and often faltering effort. Through the evolving relationship between Marianne and Connell, Rooney constructs a narrative of care that is defined as much by absence, misunderstanding, and

emotional withholding as by devotion or connection. Love, in this context, is not an endpoint but a process shaped by class difference, emotional trauma, and the erosion of stable moral frameworks in post-Catholic, neoliberal Ireland.

This fractured emotional landscape forms the backdrop for Rooney's ethical inquiry. Her characters' relationships unfold in a world where institutional and cultural certainties have faded, yet the internalized legacies of shame, silence, and repression endure. Rather than offering moral clarity, *Normal People* presents care as a difficult practice: constrained by social hierarchies, personal histories, and the risk of misrecognition. Ethical life in the novel does not reside in overt acts of goodness, but in the subtle, affective negotiations that structure moments of presence, withdrawal, or attunement.

In the following section I read *Normal People* as a novel of ethical tension, where emotional intimacy is persistently shadowed by the threat of disconnection. Drawing on María Amor Barros-del Río's ethics of care, which conceives of care as a vulnerable and relational commitment, and Jasmine Gege Yang's reading of post-feminist identity in Rooney's work, I argue that Rooney reimagines care as recursive, imperfect, and embodied. Her characters navigate care not through solutions but through efforts to remain with one another in the face of pain, uncertainty, and emotional failure. In this way, Rooney offers a vision of ethical intimacy grounded in mutual endurance.

Love, Ambivalence, and the Labour of Care

From its opening, *Normal People* establishes care as a complex, asymmetrical dynamic. Connell, picking up his mother from Marianne's house, experiences class dissonance and quiet humiliation. His mother is employed as a cleaner in the Sheridan household, and while he is ostensibly a guest in their home, the underlying social hierarchy places him in a position of subordination. This setting exposes the divide between Connell's

working-class background and Marianne's upper-middle-class privilege, despite their reversed social statuses at school. Connell is popular and self-consciously normal, while Marianne is viewed by some as "the ugliest girl in school" (Rooney 24). The tension between public perception and private reality reflects the contradictions of their social positions and begins to blur the lines between vulnerability and control. This power imbalance initiates a relationship where intimacy and shame are inextricable. As María Amor Barros-del Río observes in "The Ethics of Care in Sally Rooney's Novels: Between Self and Other," Rooney's characters' "extreme emotional repression proves detrimental to the self and prompts self-doubt and anxiety" (110). Her insight highlights the emotional costs of characters' failure to openly acknowledge or process their inner pain—a dynamic particularly central to Connell and Marianne's interactions.

Connell's emotional repression becomes even more pronounced as the novel progresses, particularly through his experience of depression. At Trinity, his feelings of inferiority return with new intensity. In one pivotal scene, Connell considers asking Marianne if he can move in with her after losing his accommodation. Instead, the moment slips away: "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. He contemplated putting his face down on the table and just crying like a child" (Rooney 152). This moment reveals how shame and pride inhibit care–not only its expression but its very possibility. Connell's inability to articulate his needs exemplifies the emotional repression that Barros-del Río identifies as central to Rooney's ethics of care, and it underscores how emotional vulnerability is often blocked not by indifference, but by learned silence.

Marianne, meanwhile, is not spared emotional contradiction. Her self-worth is eroded by a history of familial abuse, both physical and emotional, which she internalizes. "I don't

know what's wrong with me," she tells Connell. "I don't know why I can't be like normal people" (Rooney 181). This refrain, echoing the novel's title, summarizes its central concern with emotional legibility and the social costs of deviation from normative expressions of selfhood. While Marianne appears composed and even assertive at times, her demeanor can be read as a form of emotional armor, masking deeper wounds that resist verbal articulation. Yang expands on this dynamic, noting that "after her unsuccessful sexual experiences with Jamie and Lukas, Marianne finally feels at home with Connell again" (Yang 847). Yang further observes that the novel "portrays Marianne's re-objectification of her body in a positive light," since "full submission, both physically and psychologically," becomes for her a source of control (847). These insights reinforce my interpretation of Marianne's sexual vulnerability not as passivity, but as an active, if fraught, strategy for reclaiming agency through embodied trust.

Their sexual relationship becomes the clearest expression of this tension. Marianne asks Connell to hurt her, expressing a desire to be "submissive" (Rooney 138). Connell refuses–not as an assertion of moral superiority, but because he cannot understand her need. In attempting to comfort her, Connell also denies the legitimacy of her trauma. This scene can be seen as emblematic of Rooney's interest in misrecognition: Connell's refusal to harm Marianne, meant as care, is perceived by her as rejection. Yang offers a useful frame for this dynamic, suggesting that "Connell's sense of control over Marianne not only helps him battle depression and gain stability, but it also benefits Marianne," who seeks in him the safety and recognition she lacked in prior relationships (Yang 847). Thus, even the most tender intentions are complicated by emotional asymmetry.

Importantly, Rooney does not idealize emotional labour. While Marianne and Connell care deeply for one another, that care is often strained by unspoken fears, economic insecurity, and emotional damage. This is especially evident when Marianne, now

emotionally stronger, encourages Connell to leave for New York. She tells him, “You should go. I’ll always be here. You know that” (Rooney 266). The restraint of this farewell is striking: there is no dramatic climax, no tearful goodbye. This scene can be interpreted as a moment of mature, non-possessive love; a love that allows for growth rather than clinging. Yang supports this reading, arguing that “Marianne is the sole remedy for Connell” (846). Their bond, then, becomes one of mutual recognition, sustained not by romance but by shared history and care. In this way, Rooney frames healing not as resolution, but as mutual endurance.

Earlier in the novel, when Marianne leaves secondary school, Connell “missed the way Marianne had made him feel, and he missed her company” (Rooney 74). This line expresses the novel’s underlying belief: that to be known deeply is to be cared for. Yet *Normal People* also resists the fantasy of full recognition. Misunderstandings, silences, and failed gestures recur throughout. What changes is not perfect understanding but the characters’ willingness to stay with that imperfection. Yang notes that their bond “sustains their intimacy,” and adds that “the feeling of being understood and read is of immense importance to [Connell]” (847). The emotional core of the novel consequently lies here: coexisting with pain, instead of solving it.

This framing echoes the ordinary scale of their ethical world. Care in *Normal People* is rarely dramatic or transformative. Instead, it is tender, halting, and often imperceptible. Connell tells Marianne, who has been hurt in the past by both her family and ex-boyfriends, that “no one is going to hurt you like that again” (Rooney 252). It signals not only physical safety, but emotional trust–the hard-won result of their fraught, evolving connection. Yang emphasizes the therapeutic value of such moments, arguing that their emotional support “helps [Connell] rationalize his traumatic experiences through logical expressions” (846). These small acts, such as touch, presence, and listening, are then symbolic as the real labor of care in Rooney’s

fiction: sustained, often unspoken, and ethically profound.

Both Claire Keegan and Sally Rooney present intimacy as a space where ethical responsibility is quietly negotiated through emotional attention and personal risk. In *Small Things Like These*, care takes the form of moral witnessing; subtle yet consequential acts shaped by social silence and historical complicity. Keegan's characters are asked to respond not with grand gestures but with the courage to see and acknowledge suffering, even when doing so threatens their stability. In contrast, *Normal People* portrays care as an ongoing emotional labour, where love is expressed through the imperfect but persistent effort to remain emotionally available across time. While Keegan's narrative centers on a decisive moment of intervention, Rooney's story unfolds through repeated attempts at connection–fraught, often unsuccessful, but sustained. Both writers reject idealized versions of care: for Keegan, it demands ethical clarity in the face of institutional cruelty; for Rooney, it requires emotional vulnerability amid confusion and shame. In different ways, both authors demonstrate that small acts of attention, presence, and recognition can function as meaningful forms of moral engagement.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2021) and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) engage with questions of Irish identity and intimacy. While stylistically distinct, both authors interrogate what it means to live morally and emotionally in the shadow of Ireland's recent past and within the uncertainties of its present. Through close reading and theoretical engagement, this study has argued that Keegan and Rooney offer two different literary approaches to representing post-Catholic Ireland: one grounded in historical confrontation and ethical clarity, the other in emotional ambiguity and relational complexity. Taken together, their work reveals how contemporary Irish fiction not

only reflects but also reshapes the cultural narratives through which identity, memory, and morality are understood.

Chapters one and two demonstrated how both authors construct Irishness as an affective, historically contingent experience rather than a fixed or declarative identity. Keegan situates her narrative in the moral aftermath of Ireland's institutional abuses, offering a literary form of witness where memory lingers in atmosphere, gesture, and silence. Her use of spare prose and symbolic settings allows ethical questions to emerge quietly but powerfully, showing how ordinary life is structured by historical complicity. Rooney, by contrast, maps Irishness through the psychological terrain of a post-crash generation, shaped less by institutional authority than by emotional instability, economic precarity, and class-based dislocation. Her fiction reframes care not as a redemptive solution but as an ongoing struggle to remain emotionally present within systems that undermine connection.

This study's comparative approach was critical to uncovering these insights. Had either novel been read in isolation, the specific narrative strategies and ethical registers that define each might have been absorbed into broader trends or misread as representative. It was only through placing Keegan's and Rooney's work in deliberate conversation that the subtle contrasts and shared commitments between them became fully legible. Juxtaposing their work reveals how contemporary Irish literature engages with a shared cultural inheritance through divergent tonal registers, ranging from quiet realism to intellectual minimalism, from moral confrontation to emotional ambivalence. The method of contrast not only highlighted their differences, but clarified the significance of the ethical and emotional questions they ask in common.

The findings presented here contribute to ongoing conversations in Irish literary studies, particularly around how intimacy, memory and identity are being reimagined in a post-Catholic, post-crash Ireland. Keegan and Rooney show that the aftermath of history is

not only legible in public discourse or state archives, but also in the smallest scenes of everyday life—in an unspoken gesture, a withheld confession, or a question asked too late. Their fiction insists that ethical life is rarely loud or resolved; rather, it is lived in silence, ambiguity, and persistence.

While this thesis has focused on two novels, its approach offers a model for further study. Future research might extend this analysis to other contemporary Irish writers working at the intersection of intimacy, memory, and ethics, or examine how these dynamics play out in diasporic or Northern Irish contexts. Ultimately, the fiction of Claire Keegan and Sally Rooney underscores the continued relevance of literature as a space for ethical and emotional inquiry. In their hands, Irishness is not a fixed identity but a lived experience–one shaped as much by silence and gesture as by story and speech.

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