

**The Persistence of Social Power in Post-Catholic Ireland: A New Historicist
Study of Sally Rooney's *Normal People*****Husein Asadus Shahra¹ ✉, Karina Hanum Luthfia²**^{1,2} Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia

Article Info	Abstract
<i>Article History:</i> Received 21 June 2026 Approved 06 July 2026 Published 31 July 2026 Keywords: Contemporary Ireland, New Historicism, <i>Normal People</i> , Sally Rooney, Social Power	This study aims to examine how social power persists in post-Catholic Ireland as represented in Sally Rooney's <i>Normal People</i> (2018). Set against the backdrop of Ireland's transition from a society strongly influenced by Catholic authority to a more liberal and secular social order, the novel reveals that the decline of religious influence does not necessarily eliminate mechanisms of social control. Using a qualitative descriptive method and Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist approach, this study analyzes how experiences of silence and shame function as manifestations of social power within contemporary Irish society. The findings indicate that power no longer operates primarily through religious institutions but through family structures, class hierarchies, educational environments, and cultural norms that shape individual behaviour and self-perception. These mechanisms are represented through the experiences of Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron, whose lives reflect the continuing influence of social regulation in post-Catholic Ireland. This study argues that secularization in Ireland has transformed rather than eliminated social control, revealing a gap between the image of a progressive society and the persistence of power relations in everyday life.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, Ireland has undergone a profound social transformation from a society which strongly influenced by the authority of the Catholic Church to one that is increasingly liberal and secular. Throughout much of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church played a central role in shaping Irish social life, extending its influence beyond religious practice into education, morality, family relations, and everyday social behavior (Inglis, 1998). However, a series of social, political, and cultural changes gradually weakened the dominance of religious institutions and encouraged the emergence of values emphasizing individual freedom, social equality, and personal autonomy (Ferriter, 2009).

This process of secularization significantly reduced the Church's moral authority in both public and private spheres of Irish Society (Inglis, 2000). Consequently, contemporary Ireland is often regarded as a society that has moved away from the traditional forms of control once rooted in religious authority (Fanning, 2018).

Despite these transformations, the decline of religious influence has not necessarily eliminated the social pressures that continue to shape individual lives. Various forms of social surveillance, concerns about public judgment, and expectations of conformity remain embedded in contemporary Irish society (Turpin, 2022). Such conditions reveal a tension between the narrative of social progress commonly associated with secularization and the realities experienced by

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individuals in their everyday lives. The transition from a religious society to a secular one, therefore, does not automatically signal the disappearance of power relations or mechanisms of social control.

This tension is prominently represented in Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018). Set in contemporary Ireland, the novel follows the lives of Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron as they navigate personal relationships, educational institutions, and social environments that continue to shape their identities and behavior. Although both characters live within a society that appears progressive and socially open, they repeatedly experience silence, shame, social insecurity, and pressure to conform to prevailing expectations. These experiences influence the way they understand themselves and interact with others. The persistence of such experiences raises an important question: if religious authority has declined in contemporary Ireland, how does social power continue to operate in the lives of individuals?

This question becomes increasingly relevant considering that existing studies on *Normal People* have largely focused on the psychological and interpersonal dimensions of the novel. Rahmadhani and Adrallisman (2025) specifically examine Connell's anxiety disorder, while Ahadini (2021) investigates Marianne's inner conflict and emotional development. This psychological orientation is further developed by Sharma and Gupta (2023), who employ Bowlby's attachment theory to explain how childhood trauma shapes the protagonists' romantic relationship in adulthood. More recently, Arsyanti and Darmawan (2026) apply Jacques Lacan's tripartite framework to interpret Marianne's and Connell's identity crises as consequences of their dependence on external recognition. Although these studies provide valuable insights into the protagonists' psychological complexity, they still reveal certain conceptual limitations. Their predominant focus on individual psychology tends to interpret trauma, anxiety, and shame primarily as personal experiences rather than as conditions shaped by broader social and historical forces. Consequently, the relationship between the characters' emotional suffering and the transformation of social power in contemporary Irish society has received limited scholarly attention. As a result, the historical

dimensions underlying the protagonist's psychological experiences remain insufficiently explored.

Alongside these psychological approaches, several scholars have expanded the discussion of *Normal People* toward broader social and cultural dimensions. Femi and Revathi (2025), for instance, employ Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach to explain how Connell performs different identities across social settings as a strategy for negotiating his working-class identity and seeking social validation. Meanwhile, i Ball-Ilosera (2025) examines how emotional repression influences interpersonal relationships and identity formation in contemporary society. Similarly, Carmona Moliner (2023) relates vulnerability, precariousness, and youth identity formation to the socio-economic conditions of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. While these studies successfully broaden the scope of *Normal People* scholarship beyond psychological interpretations, they generally position Ireland's social transformation as a contextual background rather than as a historical force that actively shapes the literary text. In other words, the reciprocal relationship between literary representation and historical discourse has not been examined explicitly. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to how the protagonist's affective experiences reflect the transformation of social power following the decline of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Existing studies primarily emphasize the social consequences experienced by individuals, while the persistence and transformation of social power within an increasingly secular society remain underexplored.

To address this gap, the present study adopts Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist framework to examine *Normal People* from a historical and cultural perspective. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on psychological experiences, identity formation, or social performance, this study argues that trauma, silence, and shame should be understood as representations of evolving mechanisms of social power in post-Catholic Ireland. By reading *Normal People* alongside historical and sociological accounts of Irish secularization (e.g., Inglis, 1998; Turpin, 2022), this study demonstrates that the decline of the Catholic Church's institutional authority did not eliminate social surveillance, domestic

concealment, and moral regulation, which were reconfigured within modern secular institutions, including the family, class hierarchy, educational environments, and peer social norms. Therefore, this study extends existing scholarship on *Normal People* by demonstrating that the novel not only portrays the psychological and social experiences of its protagonists but also functions as a site where Ireland's historical transformation and changing mechanisms of social power are negotiated. Through a New Historicist perspective, this research offers a broader understanding of the novel as a cultural archive that documents the persistence and transformation of power relations in contemporary Irish society.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to examine the persistence of social power in post-Catholic Ireland as represented in Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018). Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring meanings, interpretations, and cultural representations embedded within literary texts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The primary data source of this study is *Normal People* (2018), while secondary data are obtained from books, journal articles, and historical studies related to Irish secularization, post-Catholic society, and social power. The data consist of words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, and narrative descriptions that portray experiences of silence, shame, social control, family relations, class structures, and educational environments. Data were collected through close reading and note-taking techniques to identify textual evidence relevant to the research objectives.

The data were analyzed using Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist approach, which views literary texts as products of historical and cultural circumstances that continuously interact with broader social discourses (Greenblatt, 1980). New Historicism emphasizes that literary works and historical context are mutually constitutive and therefore should be examined in relation to one another (Montrose, 1989). Accordingly, the analysis was conducted by reading *Normal People* (2018) alongside historical and sociological discussions concerning the decline of Catholic

authority, the process of secularization, and changing social relations in contemporary Ireland. Through this approach, the study investigates how experiences of silence and shame function as manifestations of social power and how the novel represents the persistence of social control despite the weakening influence of religious institutions in post-Catholic Ireland.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study argues that secularization in Ireland has not resulted in the disappearance of social control. Instead, the findings reveal that social power has undergone a transformation in its modes of operation and continues to function through family structures, class hierarchies, educational institutions, and cultural norms. In *Normal People*, these mechanisms are represented through the recurring experiences of silence and shame experienced by Marianne and Connell, illustrating how personal emotions are shaped by broader historical and social forces. The novel, therefore, demonstrates that the transition toward a more liberal and secular Irish society has not necessarily liberated individuals from skayan systems of regulation. Rather, it reveals that social power persists by adapting to new cultural and institutional conditions in post-Catholic Ireland. These findings support Greenblatt's New Historicist proposition that literary texts are cultural sites where historical power relations are negotiated and reconfigured.

The Decline of Catholic Authority in Everyday Life

The findings reveal that *Normal People* represents the decline of Catholic authority not merely through the reduced influence of religious institutions, but through a broader transformation in everyday social life. Rooney portrays these changes through shifting attitudes toward religious practices, sexuality, educational aspirations, and emotional well-being, illustrating how secularization reshaped the socio-cultural landscape of post-Catholic Ireland. Collectively, these representations establish the historical context within which the novel's broader dynamics of social power emerge. The following discussion

examines these transformations through four interconnected aspects.

One of the most significant transformations in modern Ireland is the decline of the Catholic Church's influence over everyday life. Throughout much of the twentieth century, the Church played a central role in regulating morality, sexuality, family relations, and social behavior within Irish society (Inglis, 1998). However, the process of secularization that accelerated in the late twentieth century gradually weakened religious authority and encouraged the emergence of more liberal social values (Inglis, 2000; Ferriter, 2009). As a literary work produced within this socio-historical context, *Normal People* reflects various changes that have occurred in Irish society following the decline of Catholic dominance.

The decline of Catholic authority is first reflected in the younger generation's changing relationship with religious practices that once occupied a central place in everyday Irish life. This transformation is illustrated through Marianne's response when attending the anniversary Mass for her deceased father:

"I didn't really want to come home for it but my mother kind of insists. I'm not a big Mass person." (Rooney, 2018: p.89)

In data (1), Marianne's statement indicates that her participation in the Mass is no longer motivated by religious conviction but by familial obligation. What was once a meaningful expression of Catholic devotion has gradually become a social expectation maintained within the domestic sphere. This representation corresponds with Inglis's (2000) observation that secularization has significantly weakened the Catholic Church's authority, particularly among younger generations, causing religious practices to lose much of their spiritual significance while continuing as cultural and familial traditions. The relationship between Marianne's experience and Ireland's historical secularization illustrates the reciprocal interactions between literary text and historical context. In contrast, the historical discourse explains the declining influence of Catholicism in contemporary Ireland. Rooney's narrative translates this broader transformation into an intimate everyday experience, allowing the

readers to understand how historical change is lived and negotiated at the individual level.

Another important consequence of declining Catholic authority is the transformation of moral values, particularly regarding sexuality and intimate relationships. This shift is reflected in Lorraine's advice to Connell concerning his relationships with Marianne:

"As long as you're using protection, you can do what you want." (Rooney, 2018: p.16)

In data (2), unlike traditional Catholic morality, which framed sexuality through concepts of sin and moral prohibition, Lorraine emphasizes personal responsibility and safe sexual practice. Her response contains no reference to religious guilt or institutional authority, suggesting that moral decision-making has increasingly become a matter of individual autonomy. This representation supports Ferriter (2009) argument that Irish society experienced a profound moral transformation as secularization weakened the Church's influence over private life. Rather than merely reflecting this historical shift, Rooney reconstructs it through everyday dialogue between family members. Consequently, the historical transformation documented by Ferriter becomes visible in the novel's interpersonal relationship, demonstrating how literature and history mutually illuminate one another within a New Historicist Framework.

The transformation of post-Catholic Ireland is also reflected in the expanding role of higher education as a space for constructing new social identities. This development appears in Connell's reflection as he imagines his future at Trinity College Dublin:

"Life would be different then. He would start going to dinner parties and having conversations about the Greek bailout. He could fuck some weird-looking girls who turn out to be bisexual. I've read *The Golden Notebook*, he could tell them. It's true, he has read it. After that he would never come back to Carricklea, he would go somewhere else, London, or Barcelona. People would not necessarily think he had done well; some people might think he had gone very bad, while others would forget about him entirely. What would Lorraine think? She would want him to be happy, and not care what others

said. But the old Connell, the one all his friends know: that person would be dead in a way, or worse, buried alive, and screaming under the earth.” (Rooney, 2018: p.19)

In data (3), Connell’s anxiety suggests that educational mobility requires more than academic achievement; it also involves negotiating a new identity that aligns with different social and cultural expectations. Trinity College is therefore represented not merely as a university but as a symbol of broader social mobility and cultural transformation in contemporary Ireland. This representation is also aligned with Fanning’s (2028) discussion of globalization and the expansion of higher education, both of which have reshaped the aspirations and identities of young Irish people. By situating Connell’s personal experience within this historical context, Rooney demonstrates how structural social change becomes meaningful through individual experience. The novel therefore complements historical accounts by illustrating how educational transformation is not only a societal phenomenon but also a living reality experienced by individuals navigating changing class and cultural identities.

The decline of Catholic authority has also altered how emotional suffering is understood and managed in contemporary Ireland. This transition is reflected in Connell’s response to psychological counselling:

“Mental healthcare professionals are always using this hygienic vocabulary, words wiped clean as whiteboards, free of connotation, sexless.” (Rooney, 2018: p.181)

In data (4), Connell expresses discomfort with the clinical language employed in the therapy, suggesting that it fails to capture the complexity of emotional experience. His observation reflects the historical transition described by Turpin (2022) in which the Catholic Church gradually lost its central role in addressing personal suffering while professional mental health services assumed greater authority. Rather than portraying this shift as entirely emancipatory, Rooney presents psychological counselling as a new institutional framework through which emotional life is interpreted and managed. Reading Connell’s experience alongside this historical development reveals the reciprocal relationship between literary

representation and historical discourse. While historical scholarship explains the emergence of secular institutions in post-Catholic Ireland, the novel demonstrates how this institutional transformation is experienced by individuals, thereby offering a richer understanding of Ireland’s changing social reality.

The Persistence of Social Power Beyond Religious Authority

The findings of this study reveal that the decline of the Catholic Church’s institutional authority did not eliminate the operation of social power in post-Catholic Ireland. Instead, *Normal People* demonstrates that mechanisms of regulation continue to function through informal social practices embedded in everyday life, including peer judgement, social surveillance, domestic silence, the normalization of family abuse, internalized shame, and domestic violence. These findings indicate that secularization did not dismantle disciplinary practices but transformed the locations and mechanisms through which power operates. Rather than being exercised primarily through religious institutions, social power is reproduced through interpersonal relationships, family structures, and secular social environments. The following discussion examines how these various mechanisms collectively illustrate the persistence of social power beyond religious authority.

One of the most significant manifestations of the persistence of social power in *Normal People* is peer judgment, which shapes the characters’ behavior and social decisions.

“In school he and Marianne affect not to know each other. People know that Marianne lives in the white mansion with the driveway and that Connell’s mother is a cleaner, but no one knows of the special relationship between these facts.”

“She’s probably just being glib and not suggestive, but if she is being suggestive it’s only to degrade him by association, since she is considered an object of disgust.” (Rooney, 2018: p.2)

In data (5), Connell deliberately conceals his relationship with Marianne from their classmates despite the growing intimacy between them outside school. His decision is not motivated by religious morality but rather by Marianne’s

marginal social position within the school environment. Marianne is regarded as an “*object of disgust*” and is largely excluded from her peer group. This situation demonstrates how social acceptance functions as a powerful mechanism of regulation within the community. From a New Historicist perspective, the episode reflects the transformation of social control in contemporary Ireland. As Inglis (2003) argues, the decline of Catholic authority did not eliminate the pressure to conform; instead, it relocated that pressure into everyday social relations. Within Carricklea, peer judgment and class-based assumptions determine who is accepted and who is marginalized. From a New Historicist perspective, Connell’s decision not only reflects this historical transformation but also translates it into an intimate personal experience. While the historical context explains the relocation of social control from religious institutions to peer communities.

Beyond peer judgment, social power also operates through continuous social surveillance that regulates how individuals construct and perform their identities in public spaces.

“If people found out what he has been doing with Marianne, in secret, while ignoring her every day in school, his life would be over. He would walk down the hallway and people’s eyes would follow him, like he was a serial killer, or worse.” (Rooney, 2018: p.20)

In data (6). Connell imagines that the discovery of his relationship with Marianne would completely destroy his social life. What he fears is not formal punishment but the judgment and scrutiny of others. The image of “*people’s eyes*” following him down the hallway illustrates how surveillance functions through an individual’s awareness of being observed and evaluated by others. This mechanism resembles Foucault’s (1995) concept of *panopticism*, in which individuals discipline themselves because they perceive themselves to be under constant observation. However, in the post-Catholic Ireland depicted by Rooney, such surveillance no longer originates from religious institutions. Instead, it emerges from peer groups and secular environments. Fear of shame and loss of social status replaces religious guilt as a means of regulating individual conduct.

The persistence of social power is further reflected in the culture of silence that governs family relationships and enables domination to continue within the domestic sphere.

“He tries the handle and she has to strain to keep it from turning. Then he kicks the outside of the door. Her body is vibrating with adrenaline.

You absolute freak! Alan says. Open the fucking door, I didn’t do anything!

Forehead against the smooth grain of the wood, she calls out: Please just leave me alone. Go to bed, okay? I’ll clean up downstairs, I won’t tell Denise.

Open the door, he says.” (Rooney, 2018: p.180)

The (7) data depicts a scene in which Alan aggressively intimidates Marianne and attempts to force his way into her room. Significantly, Marianne does not threaten to report his behavior; instead, she promises that she will not tell Denise about the incident. This response suggests that silence has become normalized within the Sheridan family. Rather than resisting, Marianne chooses to suppress the conflict in order to avoid further escalation. The episode demonstrates that power is not maintained solely through physical violence but also through conditions that encourage victims to remain silent. Consequently, the family becomes an important site where social power is reproduced and sustained.

The culture of silence subsequently reinforces social power by normalizing abusive behavior within the family and discouraging intervention from those who witness it.

“What did he say that for? he says.

I don’t know. He said no one would miss me if I was dead because I have no friends.

Would you not tell your mother if he talked to you like that?

She was there, says Marianne.

Connell moves his jaw around. The pulse in his neck is throbbing. He’s trying to visualise this scene, the Sheridans at home, Alan for some reason telling Marianne to commit suicide, but it’s hard to picture any family behaving the way that she has described.

What did she say? he asks. As in, how did she react?

I think she said something like, oh, don’t encourage her.” (Rooney, 2018: p.137)

In data (8), Marianne reveals that Denise was aware of Alan's abusive behavior but chose not to intervene. Even when Alan suggested that nobody would care if Marianne died, Denise dismissed the incident rather than protecting her daughter. Her silence demonstrates that power within the family is sustained not only by direct perpetrators but also by those who tolerate and normalize abusive behavior. From a New Historicist perspective, this indifference can be understood as a reflection of the *culture of concealment* that has long been associated with Irish social life. According to Inglis (1998), many Irish families historically concealed internal conflicts in order to preserve family reputation and social respectability. Although the Ireland portrayed in Rooney's novel has undergone significant secularization, a similar pattern remains visible within the Sheridan household. Denise prioritizes family stability and outward appearance over Marianne's well-being. Through this representation, Rooney suggests that the practice of silence did not disappear with the decline of religious authority but continues to operate within modern family structures. From a New Historicist perspective, Rooney's representation of Marianne's silence transforms this historical pattern into a personal narrative. The historical context explains the persistence of domestic concealment in Irish society, while the novel illustrates how that inherited culture of silence continues to shape family relationships in post-Catholic Ireland.

As these mechanisms of regulation continue to operate, social power becomes internalized in the form of shame that shapes how individuals understand themselves.

"Maybe I want to be treated badly, she says. I don't know. Sometimes I think I deserve bad things because I'm a bad person."
(Rooney, 2018: p.101)

The (9) data present one of the clearest examples of how social power becomes internalized by the individual. Marianne's statement reveals that years of neglect, verbal degradation, and unequal family relations have profoundly shaped the way she understands her own worth. Rather than identifying herself as a victim of abuse, she comes to believe that suffering is something she naturally deserves. This

perception demonstrates that power operates not only through external domination but also through the formation of subjectivity. In Greenblatt's (1980) terms, Marianne's identity can be understood as a form of self-fashioning, in which the self is continuously produced through interactions with the social and cultural forces surrounding it. The negative judgments imposed upon her by family members are gradually absorbed and reconstructed as part of her own self-understanding. Consequently, feelings of shame and inferiority no longer originate solely from external pressures but become internal convictions that guide her thoughts and actions. Viewed within the historical transformation of post-Catholic Ireland, Marianne's internalized shame demonstrates that the decline of religious authority did not erase inherited structures of domination. Instead, Rooney illustrates how historical patterns of social regulation continue to shape individual subjectivity, allowing the literary text and historical context to illuminate one another.

The final representation demonstrates how these interconnected mechanisms ultimately culminate in physical violence, revealing the enduring consequences of persistent social power.

"Why have you got blood on you? Says Connell. I think my nose is broken, she says. Who's that? Says Alan behind her. Who's at the door? Do you need to go to hospital? Says Connell... Was it him? Says Connell. She nods. Her eyes have a frightened look."
(Rooney, 2018: p.187)

The (10) data present the most tangible consequence of the power relations that have shaped Marianne's life. Unlike the previous quotations, which focus on social surveillance, silence, and psychological domination, this scene reveals the material impact of power through physical violence. Marianne appears injured and frightened, while Alan remains a threatening presence within the household. This violence is not an isolated incident but rather the culmination of various forms of domination that have been normalized within the Sheridan family. The scene demonstrates that power not only shapes behavior and consciousness but can also inflict direct harm on the body. As Inglis (1998) notes, institutional changes within Irish society do not necessarily

eliminate deeply rooted patterns of domination. Through Marianne's experience, Rooney emphasizes that the decline of Catholic authority does not automatically remove unequal power relations. Instead, power persists and continues to operate through family structure and interpersonal relationships in everyday life. Reading Marianne's experience alongside this historical context demonstrates that the novel does not simply portray domestic violence as an individual family problem. Instead, Rooney reveals how historically embedded structures of domination continue to survive within modern family relationships despite the decline of Catholic authority. In this sense, the literary narrative provides a concrete representation of the historical persistence of social power in post-Catholic Ireland.

The Transformation of Power in Post-Catholic Ireland

The findings presented in the previous sections demonstrate that various forms of social control continue to shape the lives of the characters despite the significant decline of Catholic authority in contemporary Ireland. From a New Historicist perspective, literary works are not regarded as representations detached from social reality; rather, they function as cultural documents that record, reflect, and participate in the historical discourses of their time (Greenblatt, 1989). Accordingly, *Normal People* does not merely portray the personal experiences of Marianne and Connell but also represents the social dynamic accompanying Ireland's transition from a society dominated by Catholic authority to one that has become increasingly secular. Through peer judgment, familial silence, internalized shame, and domestic violence, the novel reveals that power continues to operate within the everyday lives of individuals. These findings suggest that the weakening of religious authority should not be understood as the disappearance of social control altogether. Instead, it signals a transformation in the ways power functions within post-Catholic Irish society.

One manifestation of this transformation can be observed in the shift of social control from religious institutions to secular social relations. In traditional Irish society, social behavior was largely regulated through the authority of the

Catholic Church, which exercised considerable influence over morality, family life, and public conduct (Inglis, 1998). In *Normal People*, however, social regulation is primarily enforced through peer judgment, social reputation, and class expectations. Connell's fear of social exclusion demonstrates that acceptance and rejection continue to function as powerful mechanisms of behavior control. As Inglis (2003) argues, contemporary Irish society increasingly relies on informal forms of social evaluation that encourage individuals to conform to prevailing norms. Therefore, although the institutions responsible for regulating behavior have changed, the pressure to conform remains deeply embedded in everyday social life.

The transformation of power is also evident within the family sphere. Marianne's experiences reveal that the family continues to serve as a significant site for the reproduction of power relations. Although the Sheridan family exists within an increasingly secular society, patterns of domination persist through violence, emotional neglect, and the maintenance of silence. Denise's repeated failure to acknowledge Marianne's suffering illustrates that power can be sustained not only through direct aggression but also through passive complicity. This situation resembles what Inglis (1998) identifies as a long-standing tradition of concealment in Irish social history, whereby domestic conflicts were often suppressed in order to preserve family stability and social respectability. Through this representation, Rooney suggests that forms of control associated with Ireland's religious past have not disappeared entirely but continue to operate within the structures of the modern secular family.

At a deeper level, the transformation of power can be seen in the process through which individual identity is formed. Throughout the novel, the humiliation, rejection, and abuse experienced by Marianne gradually shape her perception of herself. Her belief that she deserves mistreatment indicates that social control no longer depends upon continuous external surveillance. Instead, the values and judgements imposed by her social environment become internalized and incorporated into her sense of self. This phenomenon can be understood through Greenblatt's (1980) concept of *self-fashioning*, which

refers to the formation of identity through an individual's negotiation with the networks of power, cultural norms, and social values surrounding them. In Marianne's case, her identity is not formed independently or autonomously but is produced through prolonged experiences of neglect, humiliation, and domination within both familial and social environments. As a result, shame gradually shifts from being an external social judgment to becoming an integral component of her self-understanding. Through Marianne's character, Rooney demonstrates that the most enduring form of power is not direct coercion but the capacity to shape individual subjectivity.

Overall, *Normal People* represents post-Catholic Ireland not as a society liberated from power but as one in which power has undergone significant transformation. The novel suggests that the decline of Catholic authority does not signify the end of social regulation. Rather, new mechanisms of control emerge through peer surveillance, class expectations, family relations, and the internalization of shame. From a New Historicist perspective, these representations reflect the broader social transformations taking place within contemporary Irish society, where power does not disappear but adapts to changing social conditions. Consequently, the persistence of social power in post-Catholic Ireland lies not in the survival of old institutions but in the emergence of new mechanisms that continue to regulate behavior and shape individual identity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the decline of the Catholic Church's influence in Irish society does not necessarily eliminate social control; rather, it transforms the mechanisms through which power operates in everyday life. Through a New Historicist approach, the findings reveal that the persistence of social power in Sally Rooney's *Normal People* is manifested through peer judgment, class expectations, family silence, and the internalization of shame that shape individual subjectivity. The experiences of Connell and Marianne illustrate that power continues to function in post-Catholic Ireland not only through external forms of regulation but also through

processes of *self-fashioning*, whereby individuals come to understand and define themselves through the social norms and power relations surrounding them.

From a New Historicist perspective, *Normal People* functions as a cultural document that represents the social transformation of contemporary Ireland. The novel demonstrates that secularization does not signify the end of social power but rather a shift in its forms and mechanisms of operation. Therefore, the persistence of social power in post-Catholic Ireland lies not in the survival of traditional religious authority, but in the ability of power to adapt and continue operating through secular mechanisms that regulate behavior, social relationships, and individual identity.

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