

## **“Does it have to be complicated?”: Technologically Mediated Romance and Identity in Sally Rooney’s *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People***

Julia Walton

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In this close-reading of Sally Rooney’s work, Julia Walton’s junior paper explores the role of technology-aided communication in complex romantic entanglements. This excerpt deftly engages with evidence to provide compelling analysis on the significance of mirrors and photographs in Rooney’s Conversations With Friends.*

### *Excerpt*

Yet, Frances’s problems with communication are larger than a lack of understanding of her desires in relation to her love affair. She also feels herself unable to pinpoint who she is as a person. Scholars have commented on digital media’s tendency to affect this result: Deuze writes that “in media life, our world seems intrinsically open to intervention, thriving on our constant remixing and over-sharing of it.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Rooney’s use of the phrase “read the Internet” (62), which I discussed in the introduction, has this sense of aimlessness and bottomless possibilities. As a result of this “expansion and enhancement” of ways of “thinking about who we are as human beings in conjunction with each other,” Deuze continues, the self in media life is malleable and endlessly virtualizable,<sup>50</sup> and “[t]his plasticity inevitably extends to our sense of self.”<sup>51</sup> Frances frequently demonstrates the plasticity she sees in her own identity by stating that she believes she has no personality. Perhaps this tendency originates with Bobbi, a formative relationship for her (“Bobbi told me she thought I didn’t have a ‘real personality’”), but Frances “agree[s] with her assessment. At any time I felt I could do or say anything at all, and only afterward think: oh, so that’s the kind of person I am” (18), indicating that she would be willing to accept any characteristic “at all” into her definition of herself; her “self” could be any possible self. Frances also thinks of Nick, “I was aware of the fact that he could pretend to be anyone he wanted to be, and I wondered if he also lacked ‘a real personality’ the same way I did” (37), extending this sense of identity confusion—a condition of endless possible identities—by way of comparison to Nick, who is, fittingly, an actor. Of course, Frances does not have a “fake personality,” but this phrase highlights the extent to which she cannot pin down what defines her, because she sees her personality as potentially “endless.” Indeed, Rooney’s preoccupation with the “complexities” that disrupt computer-mediated communications seems directly related

to the sense of endless “possibilities” that disrupt Frances’s self-image. But, of course, Frances does have a certain personality—it is only that she cannot “see” herself.

Rooney’s interest in the problem of undefinable selves manifests in physical, “see”-able ways in her two novels. Chiefly this occurs through mirrors and photographs, which both reflect kinds of images. The first paragraph of *Conversations With Friends*, in fact, opens with Melissa taking photographs of Frances and Bobbi after a poetry night, during which Frances “self-consciously” holds her left wrist “as if [she] was afraid the wrist was going to get away from [her]” (3), which suggests immediately Frances’s hyper-awareness and her interest in self-scrutiny. Throughout *Conversations With Friends*, therefore, Frances often looks at herself in the mirror or references practicing expressions in a mirror (or as if in a mirror; 3). Her intense self-scrutiny via mirror, though, does not imbue Frances with self-understanding. On the contrary, it not once, but repeatedly, invokes surprise. Early on, she thinks, “Sometimes . . . I liked to imagine that I looked like Bobbi. . . . The pretense was so real to me that when I accidentally caught sight of my reflection and saw my appearance, I felt a strange, depersonalizing shock” (14); after a fight with Nick, Frances “glance[s] in the mirror over the fireplace, and my face looked awful, so bad it shocked me” (129). A physical self-image, we realize, is beyond Frances—which parallels her lack of interior self-understanding. Her desire to look like Bobbi also suggests a desire for the endlessly changeable, indefinite selfhood she sees in her own personality; the shock, then, comes from the temporary realization that her self is actually finite and definable. Yet, Frances never seems to be able to sublimate the perspective the mirror imparts, and what’s more, images—exactly by way of scrutinizing them—seem to give misleading or alienating impressions, as when Frances describes her reflection as “depersonalizing” above.

Rooney often depicts photographs doing this work: just as mirror images often shock, yet fail to enduringly educate Frances about herself, digital photographs are shown to be not only a misleadingly performative sphere, but a fragmented and “depersonalizing” one. When Melissa takes photos at a dinner party, Frances thinks, “. . . the dinner party depicted in the photographs bore only an oblique relationship to the one we had actually attended” (19). This suggests not only the photographs’ failure to educate the viewer about the nature of the event, but that the photographs leave the viewer with a false impression, since Melissa intentionally captures only certain moments (which is similar to the “face-making” tactics Rooney’s characters use). Scholars have interrogated this seeming distance from reality: Mitchell argues digital images may “have lost their casual, indexical linkage to ‘the real’” because they have “becom[e] untethered appearances subject to willful manipulation”—as through Melissa’s deliberate

framing—or because of the “exponential increase in the number of images, and the rapidity of their transmission” due to digital technologies and the Internet (44), which reminds us of the proliferation of “selves” available for Frances. It seems that for Rooney, computer-mediated communication and images are both “oblique,” “snapshots” stripped of real-world context and imbued with endless, performative possibilities that confuse and mislead. In images, though, the understanding generally at stake is not between characters but of oneself, here Frances’s self, as a person in the world. To this end, Rooney also suggests that alienation from reality may arise not only through an aggregate of images, but also through the fragmentation inherent in a digital photograph itself. When Frances inspects Melissa’s photograph of Bobbi, Rooney writes, “It was a high-quality image but I zoomed until I could see the pixelation” (9). The more Frances scrutinizes Bobbi, then, the more Bobbi fragments, and the more obscure she gets. This suggests that digital photographs, by nature of being fragmented, or enabling fragmentation, tend to prevent understanding of a comprehensive meaning and “depersonalize” the person depicted for the viewers. The presence of simple, un-digital mirrors may suggest a detachment from reality exists for Frances beyond technology; however, Rooney’s language in reference to photographs here points to digital images as an essential contextualizing factor.

Given Rooney’s tendency to depict images as “depersonalizing” forces, images not only convey that Frances misunderstands her interiority, but also reflect a distance Frances feels toward her own physical, embodied self. Indeed, Frances’s observation that she holds her own wrist “as if [she] was afraid the wrist was going to get away from [her]” (3) suggests that she sees this wrist as an object apart from herself. However—just as Frances’s lack of understanding of her interiority sometimes leads to self-hate (“Was I kind to others? It was hard to nail down an answer. I worried that if I did turn out to have a personality, it would be one of the unkind ones” [169])—the space between Frances’s interior and physical selves seems to enable Frances’s disgust for her physical self. Not only does Frances wish she looked like the gorgeous Bobbi (mentioned above [14]), she also thinks of herself while gazing in the mirror, “I looked like something that had dropped off a spoon too quickly . . . For a while I stood there looking at myself and feeling my repulsion get deeper and deeper . . .” (174). Like zooming in too far on a photograph “until [she] could see the pixelation” (9), conveying hyper-definition and scrutiny, Frances’s fragmentation of her body into discrete parts (her hip bones, pelvis, abdomen, shoulders [174]) conversely leads to obscurity (“something”). Her use of “repulsion,” though, most of all indicates a self-hate achieved precisely through distance from her own body.

*Author Commentary*

Julia Walton

This passage—embedded in a larger argument about the relevance of online media to the plasticity Rooney’s characters associate with their own identities—represents a moment in my JP when I am digging the deepest into the significance of specific words, phrases, and objects. I had noticed that mirrors and photographs often recur throughout Rooney’s first novel, *Conversations With Friends*, but for a long time these moments seemed incidental. After deciding that I was interested in the role of technology in Rooney’s novels, doing a great deal of reading within media and communications studies allowed me to notice the important work these moments were doing in elaborating the nature of Frances’s self-image. Many media studies scholars talk about the fragmentation inherent to images, perhaps especially digital images. My innovation, then, was to articulate how Rooney employs that same thinking in her text to reflect an overall sense of alienation within her characters.

I now consider the experience of doing that research a valuable lesson in how I might apply fields that aren’t necessarily thinking about literature to my own literary criticism. In fact, a study that was incredibly important to my thinking in this passage was a small, speculative study about teenage girls who used an online role-playing community in which they could create their own avatars. These teenage girls expressed questions about the relationship between their avatars, their physical bodies, and their internal selves. Even though I never cited this study, it allowed me to realize that the distance Frances perceives between her interiority and her own body functions similarly, giving me the inspiration for the “thesis” of the second half of my JP. Frances herself is never shown building an online identity; however, Rooney’s text, laced with emails, texts, IMs, and phone calls, is very obviously interested in how various forms of technologically mediated communication affect characters’ relationships. Noticing the details I talk about in the passage above allowed me to argue that these technologies spiral out further in Rooney’s work, mediating characters’ perceptions of self even beyond the digital world.

Many fields beyond literature can offer contextualizing information that you can embed into your writing. They can also guide your thinking and critical reading in productive ways, even if you aren’t citing a particular scholar’s work. Close reading can seem like a very self-driven exercise, but doing outside reading will guide what you might notice and how you might interpret what you notice. Giving yourself that background will allow your own thinking to shine.

*Editor Commentary*

Diane Yang

Situated in the intersection of human romance and technological communication, Sally Rooney's work is already alluring as a standalone text. Featuring ill-fated affairs and aching heartbreak, there's ample substance in Rooney's work to capture the attention of any reader. In working with such a compelling piece of **evidence**, it can be tempting for a writer to "take the backseat" and let Rooney do the work of captivating the reader and creating depth. However, that's certainly not what Julia does here. By artfully weaving critical lenses and diverse voices throughout her own unique **analysis**, Julia elevates Rooney's narratives to even further heights. In this excerpt from her JP, Julia explores the disconnect that a character feels from her sense of self, focusing specifically on the function of mirrors and photographs in illuminating how the character's identity has become untethered from reality.

In the last paragraph of this excerpt, Julia notes how a character refers to her own physical body as "something." Here, Julia pauses to **analyze** Rooney's diction and illuminate the distance the character feels to her physical self. In taking note of the significance of a single word, Julia deftly uses minute details to support a more general **thesis**. **Close reading** often requires the author to pause long enough to notice humble details. Throughout this excerpt, repeatedly Julia displays her skill in doing this.

"Losing the forest for the trees" can be a common pitfall in **close reading**. For some writers working at a similar level of detail as Julia is, it can be easy to dive so deep that pieces of microscopic **analysis** start to become insular in relation to the larger **thesis**. By dispersing the contributions of digital media scholars throughout her work, Julia steers clear of this pitfall. In drawing upon these **scholarly sources** to illuminate certain details about Rooney's work from a technological lens, Julia presents an exemplary **close reading** marked not only by its perceptiveness but also its range of perspective. Ultimately, the interactions between the sources that Julia brings into the conversation help to amplify the "fragmentation" of the characters' identities. Given that the piece of **evidence** that Julia engages with deals with photography, it's fitting how skillfully Julia applies critical lenses to Rooney's work.

**Works Cited**

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**Bios**

**Julia M. Walton, '21** is a senior concentrating in English and pursuing certificates in Creative Writing, Humanistic Studies, and East Asian Studies. She is from Berwyn, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia. Her creative and critical work has previously appeared in *COUNTERCLOCK*, *The Foundationalist*, *The Paper Shell Review*, *Tortoise: A Journal of Writing Pedagogy*, *The Nassau Literary Review*, *Questions: Philosophy for Young People*, and *The Best Teen Writing of 2016*. Currently, beyond working on her two senior theses, she serves as a Student Representative for Princeton Arts Alumni and Editor-in-Chief Emerita for *The Nassau Literary Review*. This passage is excerpted from her Junior Paper for the English Department, which was awarded the Emily Ebert Junior Prize. Julia wrote this essay as a senior.

**Diane Yang, '23** is a sophomore from Yorktown Heights, New York. She is pursuing a concentration in Electrical Engineering and a certificate in Entrepreneurship. On campus, Diane serves as the Fundraising Chair for Princeton Racing Electric and the Director of Finance for the Princeton University Energy Association, in addition to working as a Fellow in the Writing Center. Diane wrote this as a sophomore.