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"If you weren't my friend I wouldn't know who I was": Care Virtues and the Relational Self in Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You*

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ABSTRACT

Set in contemporary Ireland, Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) focuses on the relationship dynamics between characters who struggle with intimacy and human connection, against the backdrop of the individualist ethos and existential anxieties induced by current neoliberal systems. Drawing on care ethics, vulnerability and relationality theory, this analysis of *Beautiful World* underscores how Rooney constructs her characters' psychological evolution through their progressive, albeit irregular, adoption of care virtues within relationships. The analysis shall apply Khader's taxonomy of care virtues (2011), which include "loving attention" –a willingness to appreciate and accommodate the particular nature of the other–, "the transparent self" –an awareness of how our self-interests block our recognition of the other's needs–, and "narrative understanding", a desire to engage with the other's personal history so as to make decisions that promote his/her well-being.

KEYWORDS: Sally Rooney; *Beautiful World, Where Are You*; Care Ethics; Neoliberalism; Relationality; Vulnerability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Set in contemporary Ireland, Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) revolves around the distancing, crisis and eventual reconciliation between two close friends in their early thirties, Alice –a secluded celebrity novelist who moved to a mansion in the countryside– and Eileen –a precarious literary magazine editor living in Dublin–,

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and how their respective romantic relationships with Felix –a warehouse worker– and Simon –a political adviser– revive self-injurious sentiments of inadequacy and lack of control upon themselves and others. As in Rooney's previous and highly successful *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018), in *Beautiful World* much of the story concerns the relationship dynamics between characters who struggle with emotional honesty and human connection, against the backdrop of the possessive individualism[i] and sense of alienation induced by our current neoliberal systems. As they converse about accelerating inequality, climate change and the commodification of art among other issues, Rooney's Alice and Eileen convince themselves that they are living at a time when "civilisation is facing collapse" (111), criticise the vacuousness of many of today's identity labels, and complain about the loss of meaning and purpose in their closest relationships. Most of Rooney's characters undergo existential anxiety, a "mental unease" provoked by a "self-reflexive perception of life's precarious character" (Neilson, 2015: 184), an angst against which neoliberal culture can only offer coping mechanisms of denial, like "escaping, deferring, delusion and diversion" (186), instead of promoting ontological security –a sense of stability, continuity and coherence in one's life– through "mutuality, co-dependency and collective responsibility" (185). In *Beautiful World*, protagonists slowly grow from existential anxiety to develop a healthier self-image and strengthen their bonds of trust, care and recognition within their relationships. Rooney's work becomes a perfect representative of a trend in Irish women's fiction[ii] which "critiques the affective states of contemporary late capitalism", by foregrounding "themes of subjective isolation and disorientation", which emphasise a "yearning to reach back and connect" (Bracken, 2020: 144, 146, 148).

2. VULNERABILITY, CARE AND THE RELATIONAL SELF

My analysis of Rooney's novel draws on care ethics, vulnerability and relationality theory, which conceptualise the self as intersubjective and embedded in social relations. Because we open ourselves to potential hurt, caring involves "emotional vulnerability" and enacts a "web of desires", motivating us to protect and contribute positively to our most valuable relationships (Shoemaker, 2003: 92, 95). Mutually caring relationships are in turn crucial for "the development of [an] autonomy competence" that grants us a sense of security in the face of inevitable human vulnerability (Dodds, 2014: 185). Relationality is hence central to the self, as our existence as "persons" –being valued and recognised by others– heavily depends on our "interactions with care provider[s]" (Brison, 2017: 226). Taking all this into consideration, this reading of *Beautiful World* shall pay attention to how Rooney's protagonists progressively reconfigure their previous assumptions of care and intimacy[iii] with regard to their significant others. The analysis applies Serene J. Khader's taxonomy of care virtues (2011), which include "loving attention" –a willingness to

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appreciate and accommodate the particular nature of the other within the relationship–, "the transparent self" –an awareness of how our self-interests hinder our recognition of the other's needs and vulnerabilities–, and "narrative understanding", a desire to engage with the other's circumstances and personal history to make decisions that promote her/his well-being. If, as explained elsewhere (Carregal-Romero, 2023), in Rooney's first novels protagonists need to transform their perceptions of vulnerability as failure, voice their frailties and embrace co-dependency, in *Beautiful World* the author more clearly dramatises the aforementioned care virtues as a means of reducing existential anxiety and fractiousness within relationships.

This sense of psychological maturation is also conveyed by Rooney's changing style in the course of the novel. *Beautiful World* alternates between the perspectives of Alice and Eileen; in each character's section, there is a third-person chapter followed by a first-person one, which takes the form of email correspondence between them. The early third-person chapters display a "resolutely limited point of view" through a "deadpan gaze" on the characters' fortunes (Power, 2021). Alice and Eileen are first depicted in a rather defamiliarising way; in the first chapter, Alice's name only appears four pages into the story[iv], and her failed date with Felix is rendered from an emotional distance, almost impassively. Yet, in her constant observations of Felix's behaviour, readers perceive Alice's defensiveness and insecurities as she silently interprets his reactions: "Something in the calm coolness of her look seemed to unsettle him" (13). As the story unfolds, this initial tone, cold and measured, becomes warmer, and starts including frequent psychological commentary and relevant insights into the characters' interlaced personal histories. As writer Anne Enright notes in her review, in the last third of the book "real conversations are held" and "one mind gives way to another mind" (2021), which highlights the important topics of human bonding and relationality. In one of the last chapters, some time after a big crisis with Simon, Eileen stops obsessing over her present hurts, and decides to take comfort in the knowledge of Simon's love and care for her, of "the years of looks, suppressed smiles, their dictionary of little touches": "This much was in their eyes and passed between them" (245). At this point, Rooney's style resembles the one throughout *Normal People*, where psychological realism is sustained through a "focus on interiority" (Barros-Del Río 2022, 181), achieved by techniques approaching interior monologue and stream of consciousness, combined with unquoted dialogue. The effect of this changing style in *Beautiful World* is one where readers seem to accompany both protagonists in their paths towards increased self-knowledge, emotional honesty and openness toward others.

This openness toward others is fundamental from a vulnerability and care ethics viewpoint. While necessary for human well-being and belonging, this openness entails the acceptance of being wounded and remade by our interpersonal intimacies and connections with the outside world. Losing our relationality can be as harmful as having our openness

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abused and exploited, that is why this balance between self and others is often characterised by a "dynamics of closeness and distance" (Weiss 2020: 1379), which becomes "a productive site of tension" (1357) that can easily overwhelm us, shattering "the (seeming) coherence of the self" and the "fantasy of self-sovereignty" (1357). Because the self is socially constituted, it follows that we are always "open to transformation by the world in which we are embedded and vice-versa", no matter how hard we may try to contain or prevent the "somewhat unpredictable" effects of this embeddedness (Diprose, 2013: 191, 192). This embeddedness in the world irremediably affects selfhood, creating a perceived "loss of power" that is often feared because of "the sense of control we seek to retain" (Hoffmaster, 2006: 41).

This particular point becomes salient in Rooney's critique of celebrity culture. As readers soon discover, Alice's sudden rise to fame as a best-selling author disrupted her previous life, provoking a mental breakdown that had her hospitalised for weeks. In her emails to Eileen, Alice complains about the public persona that gives interviews and becomes promoted alongside her books: "I keep encountering this person, who is myself, and I hate her with all my energy. I hate her ways of expressing herself, I hate her appearance, and I hate her opinions about everything. And yet when other people read about her, they believe it is me" (55). Alice's self-alienation also means an alienation from others (including close friends), making her a more distant, insecure and distrustful person. Due to her emotional closeness to Felix, Alice's defence mechanisms crumble, as she anxiously confesses in an email: "I feel so frightened of being hurt –not the suffering, which I know I can handle, but the indignity of suffering, the indignity of being open to it" (137). As typical of Rooney's fiction, this process of opening up to others is fraught with tension and fear of exposing one's vulnerability and dependency.

In *Beautiful World,* the writer constructs the plot through a series of conflicts between the two pairs of lovers (Alice-Felix and Eileen-Simon), from which new aspects of her characters' personalities emerge. Rooney skilfully weaves the more confessional first-person chapters with the more impersonal third-person ones so as to dramatise tensions and unspoken emotional truths within relationships. In her emails to Alice, readers learn about Eileen's insecurities regarding Simon's sexual preferences for the typical "Instagram model who has like 17,000 followers" (76). The same insecurities then take the shape of strained silence in one third-person chapter; unable to tell Simon that she wants to be in a formal, committed relationship, Eileen suffers much frustration when discovering that he is dating a younger woman: "I just thought –No, I don't even know what I thought" (204).

While it is true that the email chapters generally transmit a more intimate tone, here, as in the rest of Rooney's novels, online communication always implies a kind of distance. If in *Conversations with Friends* characters use text messaging to perform ironic distance

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and thus hide their anger and anxiety (Carregal-Romero, 2023)[v], in *Beautiful World* the author addresses the negative effects of today's over-reliance on online communication as a substitute for face-to-face interaction. Their email correspondence does have "alienating implications" for Alice and Eileen, who cannot properly explain or discuss their grievances in the space of their written texts[vi], which "leads to a growing and increasingly hostile divide" (Taylor, 2022: 10). Chapter 25, which narrates their reunion in third-person omniscient, reads like a new beginning. It starts with the impersonal view of "two women embracing after a separation of several months"; an embrace that instantly rekindles their affections while they glance into "something concealed beneath the surface of life, not unreality but a hidden reality: the presence at all times, in all places, of a beautiful world?" (250). This renewed proximity, which makes Alice and Eileen feel connected once again, leads nonetheless to emotional turbulence when their resentments are voiced. If their friendship is eventually saved, it is thanks to their redrawing of personal boundaries and development of a relational understanding about the self and other.

The second half of the novel vividly illustrates how characters' psychological change is achieved through the progressive but sometimes irregular adoption of care virtues within relationships. Whether as a verb or noun, the term "care" is frequently repeated in Rooney's text, more so in the final chapters. At one point, Alice says about herself that "in public I'm always talking about care ethics and the value of human community, but in my real life I don't take on the work of caring for anyone except myself" –she instantly adds that, in a world where neoliberalism informs morality, "the failure is general" (187). This general failure of care can also be perceived in Simon's frustration when Felix praises his political work in favour of refugee rights: "Simon said that while of course he did care, in theory, it didn't seem to make much difference whether he did or not" (262). As friends, Alice and Eileen's mutual accusation is that each of them "cares a lot more than the other" (317). Care is talked about in positive terms, too. Felix's first love declaration is his appreciation of Alice's care for him: "You know, when I fucked my hand up earlier [at work], the first thing I thought was, I bet Alice won't be happy about this [...] And it's nice to have someone who would care about something like that" (301-2). Though *Beautiful World* raises concerns about the limited impact of care ethics in political and economic life, many other articulations of care foreground its close association with interpersonal intimacy and self-worth –that is, the existential need to feel loved and protected. As social beings, we both engage in caring practices and expect care to be returned to us: "We care because humans, with their extended periods of dependency, require care to survive" (Keller and Kittay, 2017: 545). In her fiction, Rooney emphasises this social aspect of care; from the start, her characters do care about their significant others, but, to overcome their crises, they have to devise alternative ways of caring based on a deeper, less self-centered appreciation of their loved ones.

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3. CARE VIRTUES IN *BEAUTIFUL WORLD, WHERE ARE YOU*

One of the care virtues to be identified in this analysis of *Beautiful World* is "loving attention". From the perspective of care ethics, love has been defined as "an arresting awareness of value in a person" (Velleman, 1999: 362), which "disarms our emotional defenses" (365) and creates "the mutual commitments and dependencies of a loving relationship" (373). We tend to love others even more when we intuit "their true and better selves" and respond to "their capacity to love [us back]" (Velleman, 365). Love is an expression of human relatedness, but loving others in a caring way entails "a difficult moral journey" (Bagnoli, 2003: 506) where we "re-orient and re-position ourselves" away from our selfish desires (506), becoming attentive not only to our loved ones' bounds and personalities, but also "sensitive to the claims that [they] have on us" (507). Similar considerations about love lead Khader (2011) to conceptualise loving attention as: "The active search for otherness and particularity, a persistent willingness to have one's habits of relating to the other disrupted […] Dwelling upon the otherness of the other allows one to begin to develop a knowledge about the other that arises, not from pre-established ideas of what that other should be like, but rather from immersion in what that other is actually like" (754). Loving attention hence involves an openness to reinterpret and revise one's notions and expectations about the other. Whereas the possessive individualism of neoliberal culture is basically "engaged in the remaking of identities and subjectivities" in order to discover and promote one's authentic self (Rustin, 2014: 145), loving attention – by extension, care ethics– posits that individuals can only gain "self-respect" and "moral maturity" through their ability to "make and sustain connections with others" (Keller, 1997: 154). In our relationships, loving attention impels us not to subsume the loved one into one's life project, but to regard the other's life project as "intertwined" with one's own (Khader, 752).

In *Beautiful World*, possessive individualism –reinforced by today's proliferation of identity categories that produce particular beliefs and polarised opinions, as Rooney observes through Eileen[vii]– is set against loving attention, where the first inclination is not to provide arrogant judgment, but to humbly learn about and from the other in an attitude of what Alice calls "sympathetic engagement" (232). Loving attention more clearly surfaces in the second third of Rooney's novel, when Eileen and Simon, who had been friends since adolescence, develop a romantic attachment. Deeply hurt after her breakup with a boyfriend of several years, Eileen turns to her good friend Simon, and her openness makes her more attentive to his personality. Eileen, for example, starts finding value in Simon's religious faith and communion with others, when she watches him reciting his prayers at Mass "quietly and sedately", trying to be no different from "the little old ladies" (116). Thanks to her loving attention, she now treasures "the feeling of entering into his life, even just briefly, and seeing something about him that [she] had never seen before,

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and knowing him differently as a result" (117). Influenced by Eileen's words about Simon's religious humility, Alice considers how her self-construction as an intellectually and morally superior person –in a sense, her possessive individualism– had distanced her from her parents: "I have put between myself and my parents such a gulf of sophistication that it's impossible for them to touch me now or to reach me at all […] Am I better than they are? Certainly not" (187). As this quote suggests, Alice is characterised by much self-questioning, which probably explains why her behaviour towards Felix often alternates between cold disdain and loving care. When Alice accidentally discovers his taste for aggressive porn, her unease turns into loaded accusatory silence, which aggrieves Felix, who retorts: "You're very superior, then" (120). As if to shock her, Felix decides to open up about the "horrible things" (122) he had done in former relationships, and incites her to judge him further: "You can judge me if you want, I'm not defending myself" (124). Observing him "panicky and sick" (124), Alice shifts to loving attention, appreciating the sincerity of Felix's regret, as well as his ability to admit culpability and make himself vulnerable. She then returns his words with a confession of her cruel actions in the past, which settles their conflict and disarms Felix's emotional defences. "Their conversation", we read, "seemed to have had some effect on them both, but it was impossible to decipher the nature of the effect, its meaning" (125). Though difficult to explain for both, this "effect" is definitely a positive one. A pattern therefore emerges in *Beautiful World* whereby the more loving attention characters display, the healthier and more affectionate their relationships become.

Similar to loving attention, a second care virtue to be explored in Rooney's novel is the "transparent self", which requires an awareness of how our own interests, values and projections may easily influence how we perceive and rationalise the other's actions and motives. The type of love and care we expect from others may also influence our behaviour towards them, in the ways in which we –whether consciously or not– adapt ourselves to the dynamics of the relationship, and hence modulate aspects of our personality and/or choose not to be open about certain emotional truths. Yet, as Khader points out, "one who achieves a transparent self asks important questions –questions about how her relationship to another and the sorts of investment she has in it affect her ability to be open to the other" (756). Through this self-examination, we become transparent to ourselves, and subsequently learn to develop a "perception of and response to another's needs [that] are neither blocked out nor refracted through our own needs and desires" (Kittay, 2007: 53). Though not referring specifically to the transparent self, Kwame Anthony Appiah calls this same attitude a "practical interest" for positive human connection, due to our inevitable concern "to live intelligible lives in community with other people" (2007, 58). In order to build caring relationships with others, Appiah notes, we should be able to "articulate our own behavior in relation to theirs, and this we do through our understanding of them as having beliefs and intentions –in short, as reasoning– and also as having

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passions and prejudices: in short, as always potentially unreasonable" (58). It therefore transpires that, even though we usually want to make sense of people's reactions and comprehend the "true" nature of their attachment to us, there should also be some room for the acceptance of the apparently inexplicable or irrational about their behaviour, for their "passions and prejudices". With the transparent self, we first attempt to become open about ourselves –to our own insecurities, phobias and so on, and how they affect our relationships– and then flexible about others, which may then foster their proximity and openness towards us.

In *Beautiful World*, most conflicts originate from the characters' frustrations at not receiving the kind of responses they need or desire, partly due to their lack of self-transparency. Because of a series of misinterpretations and unspoken grievances, Alice and Felix at times adopt self-defensive attitudes which make them cold and cruel towards one another. As is often the case in Rooney's fiction, the socio-affective implications of class difference have a strong impact on relationships. Constantly reminded by friends and community of not being a "good catch" and, certainly, "not the most reliable character going" (215), Felix struggles with an inferiority complex[viii] that becomes most obvious in a chapter where he, drunk late at night, visits Alice and, in response to her annoyance, humiliates her in "sadistic triumph" (226) by insisting that nobody but him actually seems to care about her. There is a relevant moment, though, when he jealously compares Alice's comfortable life with his tedious but dangerous job packing boxes in a warehouse, giving details of how his hands turn frozen and numb at work. After this, he reflects: "That's the other thing I will say about work, your feelings get really messed up in there. You start feeling things that make no sense. I should have been looking forward to seeing you, but I actually felt pissed off. And then I didn't even want to see you anymore. There's no point trying to explain it because it doesn't make any sense, I'm just saying what I felt. I'm sorry" (224). Although he claims the contrary, Felix is indeed beginning to make sense of his mixed feelings, trying to become transparent about himself. This is no easy process, and Rooney avoids here an idyllic scene of reconciliation between the couple, but, at least, Felix's new openness gives Alice a partial understanding of his contradictions.

Before this incident with Felix, Alice herself, in her emails to Eileen, had already started to become transparent about herself, by reconsidering how, in this day and age of possessive individualism, we generally tend to punish others for failing our expectations, instead of appreciating their goodness first: "We hate people for making mistakes so much more than we love them for doing good that the easiest way to live is to do nothing, say nothing, love no one" (187). Later in the story, Alice continues to criticise the principles by which she has lived, and contemplates religion as an alternative moral philosophy, because "Jesus emphasises the necessity of loving others without regard to our own self-interest" (232). Although Alice does not defend or idealise religious doctrine, she values

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the aforementioned Christian lesson, as it exercises our capacity for sympathetic engagement and compassionate attachment, just as good novels, she observes, make us experience emotional connections with "purely fictional characters" from whom we cannot "derive any material satisfaction or advantage" (232). In their relationship, too, Alice and Felix –who advance towards self-transparency– progressively construct a kind of intimate, other-oriented attachment. In spite of their differences, prejudices and impulses, they eventually develop a strong bond of mutual care, as Felix reminds her in one of their conversations: "If you wanted me to come up and look after you, I would. And I'm sure you'd do the same. Is that not enough to be going with?" (302). Echoing Joyce's "The Dead", Rooney emphasises the importance of this moment when Alice, moved to tears, watches Felix sing "The Lass of Aughrim" in the company of friends.

The last care virtue to be considered in *Beautiful World* is "narrative understanding", which incorporates attitudes associated with loving attention and the transparent self, and manifests more clearly in the final chapters, when the central characters spend some days together at Alice's home. In care ethics, narrativity is regarded as relational: there is always some confluence between self-narratives, the stories that others (family, friends, colleagues, community…) tell about ourselves, and the social and cultural discourses giving shape and meaning to personal experience. The extent to which this network of narratives allows insight and empowerment becomes central to individual well-being, resilience and ethical reasoning. These psychological resources are on many occasions enabled by the caring of significant others, especially those who, through their narrative understanding, "demonstrat[e] the willingness and ability to facilitate, mirror [and] interpret (…) [our] words and [stories]" (Paulsen, 2011: 39). One who wants to engage in narrative understanding should "avoid totalizing frameworks" –coming from one's moral assumptions, or from "metanarratives" about what is "normal" behaviour– when reacting to the indeterminacies, contradictions and ambiguities that characterise the other's self-narrative (Baldwin, 2015: 187). Care ethicists underline the necessity to interact with others sensitively and reflectively, being respectful of their fundamental otherness and partial unknowability. Furthermore, self-narratives can be more easily re-assessed and positively transformed within the narrative co-construction of intimate relationships, where "future trajectories" are often imagined (Baldwin, 184). With narrative understanding, Khader adds, one's decisions concerning the other should never be "discrete events", disconnected from the history of the relationship, but "embedded in a past and reaching out into a future" (757). This is how narrative understanding promotes a "looking-forward perspective" (757) that enhances a sense of continuity, security and connectedness in the face of the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of human life.

Through Eileen, Rooney foregrounds a perceived cultural crisis of narrative understanding in today's world, provoked by the market-driven forces of new technologies of mass information. This presumably affects not just the production of art, but also our

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approach to knowledge: "Each day has now become a new and unique informational unit, interrupting and replacing the informational world of the day before. And I wonder […] what all this means for culture and the arts […] The present has become discontinuous. Each day, even each hour of each day, replaces and makes irrelevant the time before, and the events of our lives make sense only in relation to a perpetually updating timeline of news content" (39). In this capitalist logics, there is constant replacement in lieu of narrative continuity, creating a disjunction between past and present, and rendering any new piece of information nearly obsolete and inconsequential for the near future. This situation, as discussed by Eileen and Alice in their emails, has an impact on people's sociability and intimacy with others, making relationships more fluid but unstable, hardly rooted in intertwined life projects.

Through her characters, however, Rooney also dramatises a sense of inescapability when it comes to the power of neoliberalism to shape people's affective lives. Though able to identify problems of interpersonal communication in today's world, Eileen appears to lack an appropriate narrative understanding of herself in relation to Simon and Alice, which undermines her self-confidence. Even though Alice reminds her that "it's better to be deeply loved than widely liked" (96), Eileen still struggles with a sense of failure, and is burdened with the impression that "very few people care what happens in [her life]" (42). For much of the novel, Eileen's self-narrative revolves around her teenage traumas as a school outcast, her sister's cruel rivalry and mother's little support, her abandonment by a boyfriend, Alice's distancing (which she interprets as an affront to their friendship), and Simon's presumed emotional unreachability. To transcend this negativity, Eileen needs to engage more closely with the self-narratives of her most significant others (Alice and Simon, who are not always self-transparent), and overcome her frustrations at not being loved in the specific ways she wants to: "The problem is", Simon reminds her, "that you seem to be drawn to people who aren't very good at giving you those responses" (323). Eileen's idea of Simon as caring but self-contained, as somebody who "keep[s] his personal life to himself" (36), sustains her self-narrative as loveless, but this perception changes at the end of the story, after her bitter argument with Alice. In this crucial episode, where Simon consoles a tearful Eileen, he openly declares his insecurities and emotional dependency on her[ix], but also reaffirms his love for her, which bolsters their mutual commitments and intensifies their romantic attachment. Both adopt attitudes of narrative understanding, and Eileen now begins to develop a much more positive sense of self: "I find it hard to believe anything really bad about myself when I consider how much he loves me" (335). *Beautiful World* therefore follows similar narrative patterns as Rooney's previous *Conversations* and *Normal People*, where protagonists "change one another for good once they learn to embrace and respect their own and the other's vulnerabilities" (Carregal-Romero, 2023: 223). This entails not only self-transparency, but also an attitude

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of sympathetic engagement with the other's self-narrative. In this process, Rooney's characters achieve emotional honesty and a more nuanced, other-oriented understanding of their relationships.

This last issue –that is, the ability to see oneself in relation to others and, from there, construct relationships of mutual care– remains a challenge to Alice, who starts the story as an alienated character who, when confronted by the hurts of others, typically responds: "You have no idea what I've been through" (313). Alice may well represent a kind of vulnerability that restricts itself to a "subjective dimension", and remains largely misunderstood by others, especially in cases where the sufferer has "access to material resources or social supports that promote resilience" (McKenzie, 2014: 46). Judging by capitalist standards, the millionaire Alice is the most successful (and thus should be the happiest and most self-accomplished) of the four main characters; she emerges, though, as highly vulnerable due to a recent psychiatric breakdown. At times, both Felix and Eileen remark on their precarious work conditions just to profess some scepticism on Alice's suffering: "I'm not trying", Eileen writes in an email, "to make you feel that your horrible life is in fact a privilege, although by any reasonable definition it very literally is" (73). It is also true that, even though Alice transmits her complaints about celebrity life and modern-day values, she shares few personal aspects of her vulnerability with Eileen. In the final chapters, both friends' heated argument highlights the numerous misunderstandings between them, as both misconstrue the other's words, feelings and intentions, and cannot but become aggrieved by mutual accusations of emotional neglect. This crisis is overcome later on when, in a spirit of reconciliation, they talk about the history of their relationship, of their previous conflicts but also their most treasured memories: "If you weren't my friend I wouldn't know who I was, she said. Alice rested her face in Eileen's arm, closing her eyes. No, she agreed. I wouldn't know who I was either. And actually for a while I didn't" (325). In this climate of openness and intimacy, they revalue their friendship, rekindle their affects and reassert their mutual commitments of care, recovering a sense of narrative understanding between them.

4. CONCLUSION

"To believe in myself as an individual or as an independent person", Sally Rooney expressed in an interview, "just seems delusional: […] my life is only sustained by my position within all these networks that I belong to, whether I like it or not" (cited in Alférez Mendía, 2023: 158). Rooney's characters are likewise enmeshed in, and sustained by, their social networks; the task they face is not to become more independent, but to improve their affective lives by creating and maintaining a mutually supportive sense of co-dependency with their significant others. Notions of self-sufficiency, derived from today's capitalist values of possessive individualism, prove delusional and can only intensify existential

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anxieties. In *Beautiful World,* protagonists are acutely aware of their unfulfilled emotional needs and desires for more secure and intimate attachments, and therefore have to reorient their affective lives and find alternative ways of relating to those they love. In her novel, Rooney has her characters adopt care virtues (loving attention, the transparent self and narrative understanding) which lead to more profound insights about themselves and others, strengthening their bonds of trust and recognition within their relationships. *Beautiful World* hence foregrounds human disconnect just to gesture towards healing via an ethics of care.

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NOTES

[i] Underpinned by neoliberal ideology, possessive individualism stresses self-reliance in the pursuit of self-development, dismissing the idea that, for humans, "belonging to entitites larger than the self is essential to identity and wellbeing" (Rustin, 2014: 145).

[ii] By the likes of Danielle McLaughlin, Lisa McInerney, Naoise Dolan, Lucy Sweeney Byrne and Nicole Flattery among others.

[iii] Notions of intimacy have been commonly limited to those of privacy in the sphere of sex and romance. This study, though, draws on Margot Weiss's more comprehensive definition of intimacy as: "A field of encounters, relationalities, and entanglements within which we are queerly connected to others in projects of desire and mastery, alliance and distinction, affinity and obligation [...] Intimacies go beyond identity and sex to reveal how we are connected to, proximate with, others whose worlds we share, connectivities that entangle us in the encounter with others" (2020, 1380).

[iv] Up to that point, Alice is referred to as "the woman". In Chapter Three, about Eileen, it takes eight pages for this character's name to appear.

[v] For more insights into the role of social media and online communication in Rooney's fiction, see Gray (2020) and Darling (2021) in their analyses of *Conversations with Friends.* Gray, for instance, notes how, in real life, Rooney's Frances is largely silent and incommunicative, but she "comes alive for readers in large part through her technologized, written self-construction across text messaging, instant messenger, and email conversations" (77). Darling, for her part, underlines Rooney's "close psychological analysis" in her depictions of "the intense social performance demanded of people living on the internet" (545).

[vi] Examples of miscommunication and veiled accusations abound in the email chapters. In an early email, Eileen highlights her friend's contradictions, as she supposedly decided to move to the countryside to take a break, but then quickly resumed her public engagements as a celebrity writer. Some time later, Eileen's accusations become more personal, due to Alice's perceived failure to take care of their friendship: "But presumably you're flying from Dublin airport for all these trips? Could you not have let any of your friends know you were going to be in town?" (207). Rather than engaging with Eileen's hurt feelings, Alice is defensive in her reply: "Surely you understand that this is my job?

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[…] You have never been off work sick for more than four days at a time […] And yes, I did fly out of Dublin" (229).

[vii] Rooney's Eileen complains about the proliferation of identity categories to which people uncritically attach themselves without really knowing how "to articulate what those categories consist of, how they came about" (74). For her, this illustrates how "our political vocabulary has decayed so deeply and rapidly" over the last decades, which prevents people from "mak[ing] sense of our present historical moment" (74).

[viii] In their relationships, Rooney's other protagonists Frances (*Conversations with Friends*) and Connell (*Normal People*) also suffer from an inferiority complex derived from their lower social class.

[ix] This happens after Eileen complains about not feeling really loved by anyone. To her surprise, Simon says that he "need[s] [her] more, a lot more, than [she] need[s] [him]" (322). Simon's words dismantle her firm belief that "he doesn't need anything back from [her]" (265).

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