Hegemonic Masculinity in Sally Rooney’s Novel *Normal People*: Subverting and Reinforcing Norms

Author: Hailey Thao Hien Ngo
Supervisor: Anna Lindhé
Examiner: Per Sivefors
Term: VT23
Subject: English Literature
Level: Bachelor
Course code: 2EN20E
Abstract

This essay explores how different traits of hegemonic masculinity in Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* are presented through the male characters using gender studies as the theoretical approach and whether they reinforce or subvert norms of hegemonic masculinity through their interactions with each other and Marianne. This essay claims that the novel presents both reinforcements and subversions of masculinity through the male characters introduced in the novel.

Key words
Hegemony, Masculinity, Social Power, Gender Studies, Femininity
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1 Introduction

Irish author Sally Rooney’s second novel *Normal People*, published by Faber & Faber in 2018 has since its release become a best-selling novel. The coming-of-age novel has sold over 3 million copies worldwide and gotten a TV adaptation on BBC Three and Hulu under the same name, where it became the most streamed series of 2020. The two main characters Marianne and Connell’s complex relationship has resonated with millions of people as the novel also tackles themes of social hierarchy, patriarchy, and mental health. The novel depicts the two characters as opposites of each other: Connell is popular and socially likable while Marianne is unpopular and intimidating. Their relationship is therefore kept secret because Connell is ashamed of being seen with Marianne because she is seen as less desirable in the eyes of their classmates. However, once they enter university Marianne becomes popular mainly due to her riches and Connell struggles to fit in with his peers for the first time in his life. In their hometown, Connell’s social reputation outweighed Marianne’s, but with a new city and a new social circle, Marianne’s social class outweighs Connell’s which highlights the lingering importance of social class in modern society. Rooney depicts the characters’ struggles in layers and challenges the notion of patriarchy and as a self-proclaimed Marxist, she attempts to tackle issues of social class in her novels through her characters. Having Marianne be a woman in a higher social class than Connell allows the reader to explore class differences, and further shows the contrasting privileges that come with embodying different elements of masculinity and femininity.

This essay will use gender studies as the theoretical approach. The theoretical framework will draw on the concept of hegemonic masculinity as introduced by R.W. Connell and J. W. Messerschmidt in “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept” in 2005, to better understand the traits of Rooney’s male characters represent and how they affect
Marianne’s behavior and reactions toward the characters depending on what hegemonic masculinity traits the male characters possess. Connell first introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity in 1987 and further developed it in subsequent works. In 2005, she provided a comprehensive description of hegemonic masculinity in her book *Masculinities*. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity within a given social context or culture. It represents the socially constructed ideal of what it means to be a man, exerting influence over other forms of masculinity and femininity. Hegemonic masculinity is not an innate or fixed characteristic, but rather a set of practices, values, and behaviors that are collectively defined and reinforced within a society. Connell and Messerschmidt argue that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is in need of “reformulation” (Connell and Messerschmidt 847) in four main areas: the nature of gender hierarchy, the geography of masculine configurations, the process of social embodiment, and the dynamics of masculinities.

Furthermore, this essay will explore how power dynamics and intersecting systems of oppression play a role in the dynamics between the characters in Rooney’s novel. This is relevant to note as Marianne is practicing hegemonic femininity and has access to the feminine supreme and therefore relies on her systematic advantage to further her position throughout the story. The concept of hegemonic femininity is discussed in Laura Hamilton et al.’s article “Hegemonic Femininities and Intersectional Domination” from 2019. The article discusses how in the process of achieving individual benefits, some women “engage in intersectional domination of other women and even some men” (Hamilton et al. 315). Connell as well as Patricia Hill Collins’ concept of the “matrix of domination”, which describes how different social hierarchies, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect and mutually reinforce each other to shape individuals’ experiences and opportunities, is used in the article to compare the notion of hegemonic femininity and its relation to hegemonic masculinity.
There has been plenty of research done on hegemonic masculinity in novels from different time periods, however, there has not been much research regarding hegemonic masculinity in Sally Rooney’s novel *Normal People* despite its success and popularity across different media forms. Rooney’s novel incorporates multiple male characters with different social standings and masculinity traits which play a big role in what type of relationship they have with the female lead Marianne. As there are many representations of hegemonic masculinity in the novel there stands to see whether the depictions of the male characters subvert or reinforce norms typically associated with the concept.

Therefore, the aim of this essay is to explore how different traits of hegemonic masculinity in Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* are presented through the male characters using gender studies as the theoretical approach and whether they reinforce or subvert norms of hegemonic masculinity through their interactions with each other and Marianne.

2 Theory and Background

In order to analyze whether *Normal People* subverts or reinforces norms of hegemonic masculinity this essay will use gender studies as its main theory. However, due to Rooney’s limited representation of queer male characters the focus will be on heterosexual norms within hegemonic masculinity. As this essay aims to discuss the effects of hegemonic masculinity among the characters it is important that the main concepts and areas of hegemonic masculinity as well as hegemonic femininity are defined.

2.1 Hegemonic Masculinity

Over the past two decades, Connell and Messerschmidt states in their article “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept” that research on masculinities in social science and
humanities has thrived, primarily due to its departure from a reified or essentialist understanding of the concept. Masculinity is not a rigid entity confined to the physical body or inherent personality traits of individuals. Instead, masculinities are dynamic patterns of behavior that emerge through social interactions and can vary based on the gender dynamics within specific social contexts (Connell and Messerschmidt 836).

The development of hegemonic masculine patterns is both influenced by and challenged during the process of children growing up. Gender norms and roles are constructed within schools and neighborhoods through various factors such as peer group dynamics, control of school spaces, dating behaviors, instances of homophobic speech, and acts of harassment (Connell and Messerschmidt 839). To gain a comprehensive understanding, one must consider the institutionalization of gender inequalities, the influence of cultural constructions, and the intricate interplay between gender dynamics, race, class, and region. These factors contribute significantly to shaping the complex landscape of masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 839).

This can be seen in Hayes et al.’s study “Becoming 'Good Men': Teaching Consent and Masculinity in a Single-Sex Boys' School” where school-based consent education and its relation to hegemonic masculine norms were examined. The study found that while discourses of risk-aversion, responsibility, and care were present in the discussions, they failed to disrupt the power structures that normalize sexual dominance, female subordination, violence, and homophobia. It highlighted the need for schools to address the needs of boys and young men and critically analyze competing media discourses as they contribute to shaping the norms used in social spheres. Especially in prestigious all-boys schools, where there is a strong commitment in terms of beliefs and resources to traditional concepts of camaraderie and the related expressions of masculinity (Hayes et al. 10-11). On the other hand, Steven Roberts study “Boys Will Be Boys ... Won't They? Change and Continuities in Contemporary Young
Working-Class Masculinities” explored working-class masculinity and its relation to traditional representations and gender norms. The findings indicate that working-class men enact masculinity in diverse ways depending on social characteristics and the dynamics of social spaces. Young men in non-traditional roles, particularly in retail, express positive experiences and demonstrate a willingness to challenge traditional gender ideologies. The study also examines the division of domestic labor and childcare, revealing a desire for more equitable arrangements while recognizing institutional and structural barriers (Roberts 683-684).

According to Connell and Messerschmidt hegemonic masculinity has been associated predominantly with negative traits, portraying men as unemotional, independent, non-nurturing, aggressive, and detached, which are then linked to the causes of criminal behavior. Men's behaviors are often reified into a concept of masculinity, which then becomes both the explanation and the excuse for those behaviors in a circular argument. This can be seen in discussions on men's health, issues in boys' education, and other contemporary challenges framed as a crisis in “masculinity”. While the concept of hegemonic masculinity is rooted in practices that allow for the continued dominance of men over women, it is not surprising that in certain contexts, it specifically refers to men engaging in toxic practices, including physical violence, that uphold gender dominance within that particular setting (Connell and Messerschmidt 840).

Rachel Jewkes et al. suggest in their paper “Hegemonic Masculinity: Combining Theory and Practice in Gender Interventions” that combining theory with practice reveals important insights, including the recognition that masculinity itself is not inherently problematic or oppressive. Interventions should focus on challenging male privileges derived from patriarchal social structures and promote changes in men's practices and beliefs while striving for overall transformation of masculine ideals. Multi-level interventions that address
social norms and involve both men and women are more likely to achieve sustainable and impactful change in advancing gender equity (Jewkes et al. 122-123).

Likewise, Connell and Messerschmidt explain that most understandings of hegemonic masculinity incorporate “positive” actions, such as providing for a family, maintaining a sexual relationship, and being a father. Understanding the gendered consequences in violence, health, and education requires examining men's and boys' practical relationships with collective images or models of masculinity, rather than viewing them as mere reflections of those models. As hegemonic masculinity encompasses multiple meanings, men can navigate among these multiple meanings based on their interactional needs. They can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable, yet strategically distance themselves from it at other times. As a result, “masculinity” does not represent a fixed type of man, but rather a way in which men position themselves through discursive practices (Connell and Messerschmidt 840-841).

However, research consistently demonstrates that certain masculinities hold greater social centrality and are closely associated with authority and social power. The concept of hegemonic masculinity recognizes the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities, a process that has been extensively documented across various contexts globally. Hegemony operates, in part, through the construction of exemplars of masculinity, such as professional sports stars, who symbolize authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully conform to these ideals. The original formulations also highlighted the potential for change in gender relations, recognizing that the dominant pattern of masculinity can be challenged through women's resistance to patriarchy and men embodying alternative masculinities. (Connell and Messerschmidt 846).

Trenton M. Haltom discusses in his article “Masculine Maneuvers: Male Baton Twirlers, Compensatory Manhood Acts, and Hybrid Masculinity” the experiences of men in the context of a women-dominated sport, baton twirling, and explores how they maneuver
within this setting to assert their masculinity. The findings highlight the experiences of harassment and self-doubt lead male twirlers to compensate for perceived gendered, sexual, and racial shortcomings by maneuvering masculinity. They employ practices associated with hegemonic masculinity in sports and work contexts to regain their privileged status as men. This creates a hybrid masculinity that reinforces multiple social hierarchies and gender inequalities. The study suggests that masculinity remains a homosocial endeavor, even in women-dominated environments (Haltom 541-542).

Connell and Messerschmidt suggest that researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of how masculinities are shaped and experienced across different social contexts by examining hegemonic masculinities at a local, regional, and global level. Local masculinities are shaped and developed through direct interactions among families, organizations, and immediate communities. Regional masculinities are constructed at the cultural or national level, encompassing discursive, political, and demographic aspects. Lastly, global masculinities emerge and take shape in transnational arenas such as world politics, transnational business, and media (Connell and Messerschmidt 849).

The significance of embodying masculinity in shaping one's identity and behavior is evident in various contexts. During youth, displaying adept physicality becomes a primary marker of masculinity, as exemplified by the realm of sports. This association between heterosexuality and masculinity is a prominent feature of Western culture, where boys who have heterosexual partners are often held in high regard, and the process of sexual education is framed as a journey of exploration and conquest (Connell and Messerschmidt 851).

To gain insight into the concepts of embodiment and hegemony, it is crucial to recognize that bodies serve as both subjects and objects within social interactions. In Ricciardelli et al.'s study “Investigating Hegemonic Masculinity: Portrayals of Masculinity in Men’s Lifestyle Magazines” multiple men's lifestyle magazines targeting different
demographics were examined to explore similarities and differences in the portrayal of body, aesthetics, grooming, and fashion. The magazines featured full-length body shots of men, indicating increased visibility and objectification of the male body. This objectification has negative consequences similar to those observed in women's magazines. The shifting norms and increasing visibility of male bodies place pressure on men to transform their bodies as part of their identity. The magazines reinforce the notion that men are responsible for their appearance, promoting self-improvement and consumerism through advertisements and articles related to the male body, aesthetics, and fashion (Ricciardelli et al. 77).

The circuits of social embodiment can vary in their simplicity, ranging from direct and straightforward connections to intricate and multi-faceted routes that traverse institutions, economic systems, cultural symbols, and other factors – while always involving the materiality of the human body. An illuminating example of this can be found by examining gender dynamics within the realms of health, illness, and medical treatment (Connell and Messerschmidt 851-852). As presented in Will H. Courtney’s paper “Constructions of Masculinity and Their Influence on Men's Well-Being: a Theory of Gender and Health”. The findings of the research indicated that women in the United States tend to adopt healthier beliefs and personal health practices compared to men. This difference contributes to the fact that women experience less severe chronic conditions and have a longer life expectancy. From a social constructionist perspective, these gender differences are shaped by societal expectations of femininity and masculinity. Men are expected to adhere to cultural definitions of masculine beliefs and behaviors while rejecting what is perceived as feminine. Men adopt unhealthy beliefs and behaviors to conform to ideals of masculinity and assert their power in a patriarchal society. By dismissing their health needs and taking risks, men reinforce social inequality and sustain the social structures that reward their poor health habits. Confronting men's poor health
status and unhealthy behaviors has the potential to improve their well-being but may also undermine their privileged position and authority in relation to women (Courtenay 1397).

The association of hegemonic masculinities with gendered power dynamics is likely to result in distinct patterns of internal division and emotional conflict. Tensions in relationships with fathers, for instance, may arise due to the gendered division of labor in child care, the demanding work culture in professions and management, and the preoccupation of affluent fathers with wealth management. Another source of ambivalence could be men's response to projects of gender equality, leading to oscillating acceptance and rejection. Strategies aimed at maintaining power often involve dehumanizing other groups, leading to a decline in empathy and emotional connection within oneself. It is important to note that while hegemonic masculinity may confer social advantages, it does not necessarily guarantee a fulfilling and satisfying life experience. Rather than pitying privileged men, limitations and potential drawbacks associated with the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity should be recognized (Connell and Messerschmidt 852).

2.2 Hegemonic Femininity and Intersectional Domination

Hegemonic power is not solely exerted through active oppression, such as discrediting or violence, but can also be achieved through the assimilation of nonhegemonic masculinities into the existing gender order. Similar processes of incorporation and oppression can also be observed among girls and women who engage in the construction of masculinities. The concept of hegemonic masculinity was originally conceived alongside the notion of hegemonic femininity. Gender is inherently relational, and the construction of masculine identities is defined in relation to some model of femininity. Moreover, by exclusively examining men's activities, we overlook the significant role women play in shaping gender among men. Through life-history research, it becomes evident that women are central to the processes that construct masculinities, whether as mothers, schoolmates, girlfriends, sexual partners, wives, or as
workers in the gendered division of labor. While the concept of hegemonic femininity highlights women's compliance with patriarchal norms, it remains highly relevant in contemporary mass culture (Connell and Messerschmidt 848).

In Yuchen Yang’s article “What’s Hegemonic about Hegemonic Masculinity? Legitimation and Beyond” questions about the tension between the hierarchy of masculinities and femininities, the possibility of women practicing hegemonic masculinity, and the boundary between masculinity and femininity are raised (Yang 329-330). Which brings us to Laura Hamilton et al.’s “Hegemonic Femininities and Intersectional Domination” where the concept of hegemonic femininities, which occupy complex and influential “intermediate positions” within the domination matrix, is explored. Certain women engage in a performative display of deference towards men who embody hegemonic masculinities, while also exercising domination over others. The adherence to hegemonic femininities, whether done consciously or unconsciously, is motivated by the desire to attain a femininity premium. This refers to a range of personal advantages that individuals gain by conforming to these societal ideals. For individual women, the collective costs associated with performing hegemonic femininities are often overshadowed by the individual promise of gaining a femininity premium. Typically, white, affluent, heterosexual women find themselves in the most advantageous position to reap the rewards of a femininity premium. Women embodying hegemonic femininities may leverage their social positioning – not only in terms of race, class, but also gender – as a source of power over individuals and groups, thereby perpetuating a process of intersectional domination (Hamilton et al. 316).

Scholars commonly employ the concept of emphasized femininity to describe women's adherence to societal gender expectations. However, this raises a troubling paradox: Why do women invest in emphasized femininity when it ultimately leads to their own subordination? Within this framework, there seems to be no way to conceptualize the benefits that women may
derive from their investment in femininity. Women only conform to femininity because they internalize men's interests while suppressing their own, failing to recognize the limited gains and significant losses associated with compliance to the gender order (Hamilton et al. 320).

Hegemonic femininities encompass the widely celebrated cultural ideals of womanhood specific to a particular time and place. They function to legitimize and uphold various forms of oppression within the matrix of domination. Scholars taking an intersectional approach argue that hegemonic femininities inherently incorporate privileges associated with characteristics such as whiteness, affluence, heterosexuality, cisgender identity, nationality, citizenship status, youth, and ability. Women who embody hegemonic femininities cannot be viewed merely as passive victims of social structures; instead, they actively benefit from and contribute to the matrix of domination. Within the hierarchy, those closest to hegemonic masculinity, primarily wealthy white men, possess the highest degree of power. Those positioned just below them have greater access to White male power, yet still experience marginalization (e.g., working-class White men, Latino, Asian, and White immigrant men). At the bottom of the hierarchy are men who face subordination from both of these groups (e.g., Black men and men from indigenous communities) (Hamilton et al. 322).

While race and class boundaries are often characterized by social, physical, and legal segregation, gender expectations typically revolve around intimate involvement between men and women, including sexual attraction, romantic relationships, and marriage. Marriage, in particular, entails cohabitation, the merging of property and kinship, and the expectation of monogamy and procreation, perpetuating a lasting legacy. The social segregation and continuity of social groups rely on the routine pairing of men and women within specific class, national, and racial boundaries. For example, the consolidation of class privilege often involves affluent and well-educated women partnering with similarly privileged men. Limiting mating to occur only within the boundaries of a nation-state and among individuals possessing legal
citizenship creates barriers for extending benefits to individuals classified as “outsiders”. (Hamilton et al. 323).

However, cultural ideals of womanhood perpetuate the assumption that women will opt for the gentle persuasion and charm offered by men in positions of power, rather than challenging the oppressive nature of their rule. These patterns of alignment can also be observed in the workplace and community politics (Hamilton et al. 324).

The active participation of women who embrace hegemonic femininities is crucial for sustaining the matrix of domination, as hegemonic masculinities rely on the continued complicity of women. By embodying and performing these ideals, women gain a form of currency that can be strategically used for personal gain and to maintain the collective status of their social groups across various axes such as race and class. The skillful enactment of hegemonic femininities grants individual women a femininity premium, bestowing them with certain advantages. Even those who strive for but do not fully achieve hegemonic femininities can still enjoy some benefits. Their efforts are often interpreted as signs of good character, morality, and dedication to upholding cultural ideals of femininity and other intersecting identities. Taking an intersectional approach allows us to better recognize the extent of these benefits, which are often concealed when focusing solely on women's positioning in relation to men (Hamilton et al. 326).

How does a femininity premium manifest itself? In the contemporary United States, women who embody hegemonic femininities often experience advantages in locating and attracting sexual and romantic partners who possess racial privilege, higher education, wealth, income, attractiveness, and popularity. They may have a greater ability to shape the standards of sexual judgment, positioning their own behaviors and attitudes as the norm against which others are measured. By embodying hegemonic femininities, women increase their chances of accessing the economic and social benefits associated with marriage. Furthermore, successful
performance of hegemonic femininities grants (white) women a sense of protection. Their purity and respectability are upheld and defended, often by invoking the potential violence of white men, the police, or other authorities (Hamilton et al. 327).

The allure of accessing a femininity premium serves as a powerful incentive for women who are poised for success. Demonstrating adeptness in performing hegemonic femininities grants them entry to a range of advantages that extend across various dimensions. This is why affluent white heterosexual women, in particular, frequently become active participants in the matrix of domination. They are not unwitting conformists or passive victims of misguided beliefs, but rather strategic actors who navigate the landscape to their advantage (Hamilton et al. 329).

In María Amor Barros-Del Río’s article “Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*: the millennial novel of formation in recessionary Ireland” Sally Rooney is described to demonstrate a keen awareness of material hierarchies, highlighting the complex issues surrounding identity formation. Through her work, she exposes the inequalities stemming from social class disparities and gender divisions. This is exemplified Marianne's exploitation of her body, using it both as a means of sexual objectification and as a path to redemption (Barros-Del Río 187).

Hamilton acknowledges that there can be individual costs, which is referred to as a femininity tax, associated with embodying culturally celebrated femininities. These costs may include a diminished sense of sexual agency, dependence on men's financial resources, physical and psychological harm, and a lack of emphasis on intellectual development. However, as the concept of a tax implies, only a portion of the overall benefits is relinquished. The advantages that can be gained by performing hegemonic femininities are also limited by a femininity ceiling, as these femininities do not occupy the highest positions within the matrix of dominance. Expectations linked to power, income, or status often explicitly exclude the performance of hegemonic femininities. Although often overlooked, women who embody
hegemonic femininity align both personal and collective benefits along all axes, except for
gender. They can simultaneously improve their individual positioning within the matrix and
uphold the collective status of the dominant social groups they belong to through the
embodiment of cultural ideals of womanhood. Women who are complicit in maintaining the
matrix of domination make a concession on one dimension: they gain individual benefits while
perpetuating gendered forms of oppression that disadvantage women as a whole. Men, on the
other hand, do not make such concessions. The enactment of hegemonic masculinity merely
strengthens their shared privileges within the framework of the matrix of domination. Indeed,
men embodying hegemonic masculinities always operate from a position of both individual
and collective privilege (Hamilton et al. 330).

3 Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Connell

Connell experiences a constant sense of fragmentation, a burden articulated by the author:
“With a little subterfuge, he can lead two entirely separate existences, never confronting the
ultimate question of what to do with himself or what kind of person he is” (28). The reader
encounters a young man deeply troubled by material wealth, which for him is “the substance
that makes the world real” (160), or rather, the lack thereof. His identification with neoliberal
values, equating material abundance with success, condemns him to perpetual insecurity and
limited agency. From the outset, he is acutely aware of his modest background, a fact that
becomes even more pronounced when he enters Trinity College in Dublin. There, his peers’
appearance, manners, and conversations revolve around wealth and outward appearances. He
resents his inability to fit into that world and feels like an outsider: “They navigate the world
differently, and he will probably never truly understand them, and he knows they will never
understand him, or even make an effort to” (68). This self-exclusionary attitude implies that,
for Connell, social class is an insurmountable barrier, and instead of attempting to reconcile with it, he blames Marianne for enjoying a privileged position: “That's why it's easy for you, by the way,” he said. “Because you come from a wealthy family, that's why people like you” (88-89). Connell and Marianne’s relationship is complex in the sense that they rely on each other both emotionally and physically while feeling an immense comfort with each other. Despite sharing an instant connection through their intellectual conversations, they repeatedly end up in having miscommunications over their feelings for each other (175).

His relation to Marianne’s brother seems to be different as they are both men. Alan seems to respect Connell immensely because he embodies physical masculine traits that Alan respects. However, he is quick to disregard Connell as soon as he hears about his mental issues and the fact that Connell is involved with Marianne (239). Showing that his respect for Connell is based on his admiration of Connell’s physical appearance and strength. Alan backs off from bullying Marianne when Connell steps in due to his larger physique and strength. These traits are something that Alan constantly act on and he seems to be overly interested in what Connell has to say. This is of course relevant only when he is in awe of Connell for being his definition of the perfect Alpha male. The strong rule the weak mentality. Meanwhile Connell does not necessarily support this ideology, it does not change the fact that he commands respect from men solely due to his appearance.

Connell is physically fit and attractive making him the object of envy of men and desirable to women which can be seen in the sense that women swoon at his feet and men respect him for being able to pull women (11-12). Despite having the biological benefits Connell is still being controlled and submits to the hegemonic masculinity standards as he is socially powerful only if the men around him respects his masculinity. He does not have financial power and is therefore ashamed of being seen with Marianne because she isn’t socially desirable within their community despite her social class. He is constantly afraid of
speaking out against his friends’ actions despite disliking them and knowing that it is morally wrong, but he is submitting by saying that they are his friends, which shows his fear of being socially outcast and falling off the hierarchy.

Marianne holds a higher position in society than Connell. No matter how much social power Connell holds he will always be below Marianne financially, which is shown when Rob is questioning Connell about how Marianne sees him, even though Marianne is bullied in school by Connell’s friend group they still seem to hold her at a higher social class due to her background (23). Connell is an example of this, whereas Eric and Rob are peacocking trying to uphold stereotypes (38) Connell is aware of his differences from them and acts in a different manner (32).

Connell is aware of how Marianne is seen in school and does not want to associate with her due to their difference in social stance in high school. He knows that if he were to acknowledge their relationship, he would be laughed at and that in turn would cause him more anxiety about his identity that he is already trying to figure out. In other words, Connell is watching out for himself at the cost of other people while still trying to maintain the image of being a victim, as mentioned by Marianne (33). Connell is constantly moving between wanting to be a good person while also appearing to be a good person to the masses. Hence why he’s so happy when Marianne calls him a good person despite what he has done to her. Also, why he dates Helen, because she makes him feel like a good person, elevating his self-esteem.

3.2 Alan

Alan is Marianne’s older brother and her main bully throughout the novel. It can be read that he has emotionally and physically hurt Marianne since childhood. He is the representation of toxic and violent masculinity. He embodies traits of masculinity that are deemed negative as he constantly seeks out Marianne to harass her physically and mentally to make up for his own feelings of adequateness academically (141). He constantly lashes out towards Marianne for
selfish reasons and is only satisfied whenever he sees her quiver or hurt. He is constantly in her personal space both mentally and physically by asking intrusive questions about where she is going and who she is meeting. When finding out the answers or filling out the blanks with degrading answers, he feels satisfied when she agrees and makes him feel better about himself as a person (229). He is constantly trying to assert dominance over her with these actions. It can be speculated over why he acts the way he does. Alan continuously harasses Marianne verbally as well as physically in their home. It could be that he learned that this behavior is acceptable in the home by their father that used to abuse both mother and daughter physically before he passed away. The behavior is also not stopped by the mother indicating that she believes her daughter to be deserving of such abuse.

Unlike Connell and Jamie, Alan’s exhibition of masculinity forces Marianne into submission and she can’t help but fear him despite her usual strong will. She is unable to stand up for herself because she is aware of the physical repercussions coming her way and has learned that it is easier to just accept the physical abuse as she has seen through her mother being beaten up by her late father. With Jamie it is different because of the relationship dynamic and their established rules. Her exposure to Jamie’s abuse is nothing compared to Alan and her attitude towards him is indifference which he doesn’t seem to mind. Their physical relationship is restricted to them and can therefore be controlled. However, Alan on the other hand is volatile and she never knows when he will strike next, the absolute primitive way of forcing submission without any kind of consent or control from Marianne’s side is what makes her fear him. Alan’s character is the opposite of Connell’s. Whereas Connell’s character is actively trying to subvert stereotypical masculine traits, Alan’s character embodies them through his care for upholding a good reputation (240).
3.3 Jamie

Jamie is first introduced to the reader as a friend of Marianne’s that just won a game of pool (89). Feeling smug and intoxicated after his win he challenges the people in the room to a game wherein Connell accepts and wins with all the girls’ attention. After his loss he’s no longer mentioned and the focus shifts to Connell instead. The next time Jamie is brought up is months later into the story and he’s revealed to have been Marianne’s boyfriend for a few weeks. Connell tells Marianne that Jamie isn’t a “bad-looking guy” (113) which he follows up by mentioning how he once won a game of pool against him, showcasing his competitiveness and need for Marianne to validate him. Connell and Jamie’s relationship is filled with envy toward one another. Jamie envy’s Connell’s physical abilities, good looks, and ability to grab Marianne’s affections while Connell is unable to overcome his inferiority complex of being from a lower social class than both Marianne and Jamie as shown when he grovels over the fact that Marianne probably wanted a boyfriend who was not “broke” (125).

Despite the reader being told by both main characters that Jamie’s had a crush on Marianne for a long time his actions and words seem to differ as Marianne describes how Jamie makes her feel like a “carcass” (113). This could be due to how she early on in their relationship revealed that she’s a submissive and likes getting hurt by men in bed. Jamie complies with this, and it is later revealed that Marianne frequently thinks about breaking up with Jamie and that she has little to no respect for him as a person (138). Jamie often appears to be bragging about himself and when Marianne complains to her friends about him, they tell her “Well, he’s a chauvinist pig, what do you expect?” (139), because it is expected of men to have no respect for women and try to assert dominance wherever they go.

Jamie and Marianne’s relationship is interesting in the sense that despite holding such an intimate relation they are the most distant. The two are drawn to each other because they are the two characters that present the most characteristics of hegemonic masculinity as well as
hegemonic femininity. As Hamilton et al. mentioned in their article Marianne and Jamie are drawn to each other to maintain the hierarchy of power. Both being from affluent backgrounds, white, young, and hetero which gives them the privilege of being the epitome of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Hamilton also mentions how class privilege often involves affluent and well-educated women partnering with similarly privileged men. Whenever Marianne chooses her boyfriends she tends to pick men who are of similar social class as her. Jamie is keen on picking on Connell to “put him into his place” as he knows that Marianne is attracted to him. Jamie has the power of social standing and financial power but he lacks the physical traits to fulfill the attributions of hegemonic masculinity. But due to him being higher up the hegemonic ladder he feels as if he has the “rights” to put Connell in his place with his snarky comments. When Jamie tells Connell he’s “looking rough” (163) in a mocking way Marianne is rarely seen defending Connell which ties together with Hamilton mentioning how hegemonic femininity often tends to cater to hegemonic masculinity to maintain favor and their own social standing.

Rooney effectively captures this complexity on Marianne by stating, “There's always been something inside her that men have wanted to dominate, and their desire for domination can look so much like attraction, even love” (192) Consequently, the female body serves a dual but not exclusive role: as a potentially empowering tool for social integration or success and as a target of violence and abuse, to the extent that the subject dissolves, prioritizing the utility of the body. In these instances, Normal People shows the precarious and contentious position of the female body in neoliberal societies, where relationality is often reduced to commodification, and the destabilizing impact of objectification on women is addressed.

Jamie is seen projecting a very prideful personality despite being the one chasing Marianne to be lovers. He constantly belittles her in front of their friends and expects her to fulfill the ideals of feminine supreme by asking her where the “cream” is, as he expects her to
have brought it to the table by herself. When he demands that Marianne go bring the cream from the kitchen, he is seeking validation from the people around him, as he believes he is right in acting so due to his position. Because Jamie has never been told off before, when he realizes that no one is on his side he throws a tantrum and takes it out on Marianne in the kitchen (177).

Throughout the whole story Jamie’s character does not go through any redemption or character development instead leaving his characterization one-dimensional.

4 Conclusion

To summarize, this essay has thus far discussed how the male characters in Sally Rooney’s Normal People subvert and reinforces hegemonic masculinity norms in the novel by showcasing them in relation to the female protagonist Marianne and her role of representing hegemonic femininity. Although the novel subverts norms through Connell, as he is the only male character who is actively developing and working towards being vulnerable by discussing and seeking help for his mental health, the same development cannot be seen in the other male characters. As discussed in the analysis, many of the male characters who possess advantageous traits within the scope of hegemonic masculinity were painted in a negative light and lacked character development in favor of characters who embodied desirable yet less advantageous traits.

In addition to the discussion, this essay looked at previous research done on hegemonic masculinity by using Connell and Messerschmidt’s “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept” as the main definition of the concept. As Connell and Messerschmidt’s definition is quite widely used within research of hegemonic masculinity it was easy to find research that further built on the concept as well as provided more data on the matter. Finding research on hegemonic femininity proved to be accessible as well due to it being a topic of interest for many authors as it is often accompanied by studies regarding hegemonic masculinity. It was,
however, harder to find research on Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* as it is still a relatively new work of fiction.

Although there has been extensive research done on hegemonic masculinity as a concept in gender studies, there is however much room for further application of it on *Normal People*. Research on homosexuality in relation to hegemonic masculinity is an important topic that could be applied to Rooney’s novel. Although the author does not label any male characters as gay in the novel, there could be potential underlying motives in the novel that has not yet been explored as of the writing of this essay. An interesting topic of research on masculinity would be studying Alan’s admiration for Connell through a queer perspective and how it contributes to his actions toward Marianne. Due to the novel’s popularity, it has been adapted into a film series as well. As the series is relatively new comparing the adaptation’s representation of the masculinity traits displayed in the novel is an option that has not been discussed in academic papers.

In conclusion, while Rooney represents complicit masculinity through Connell’s working-class masculinity and showcases how he actively tries to build his identity beyond the constraints of set norms, the majority of the men representing hegemonic masculinity in the novel display negative norms such as violence and dominance over the female characters in the novel, both verbally as well as physically. This comparison can be seen through their relations to the female protagonist Marianne as a majority of the male characters use her for their violent outbursts or sadistic sexual fantasies. Rooney’s choice to showcase the subversion of stereotypes through Connell who represents working-class masculinities while reinforced stereotypes are shown through male characters from the middle to upper class could potentially be from the author’s political standpoint. However, the fact that so many of her male characters harbor negative norms of hegemonic masculinity further amplifies the stereotype of hegemonic
masculinity being defined by violence. The implication of this conclusion welcomes further research on the topic as extensive research has not been done previously on this novel.


