THE WORLD IS BEAUTIFUL IN SALLY ROONEY'S "BEAUTIFUL WORLD, WHERE ARE YOU"

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Abstract: I will start by contradicting the pessimistic view on contemporary life suggested in the title of the book – which was inspired by Friedrich Schiller's poem "Die Goetter Griechenlandes". The very aim and 'ambition' of this article is to demonstrate that this very novel is the glaring proof of the beauty and joy of living in this world of the twenty-first century, one forsaken by Olympian Gods and Heroes but densely inhabited by novelists like Sally Rooney. This approach will concentrate mainly on the author's molding of the characters and the versatile narrative technique of the novel.

Keywords: friendship, love, fame, family, parenthood

The title of the book – a quote from Schiller's poem – undoubtedly makes the reader think of a disillusionment with the contemporary world or the sense of a passing away of a once beautiful life, when the Olympian Gods and Heroes governed human destinies. In contrast, our modern world has lost its attraction and restorative power:

Da ihr noch die schoene Welt regiertet
An der Freude leichtem Gaengelband
Gluecklichere Menschenalter fuehret,
Schoene Wesen aus dem Fabelland. (Schiller, 2005)

Conversely, Schiller goes on, the world we live in is ugly, cold, repelling, oftentimes inimical:

Schone Welt, wo bist du? Kehre wieder,
Holdes Blutenalter der Natur!
Ausgestorben trauert das Gefilde,
Keine Gottheit zeigt sich meinem Blick,
Ach! Von jenem lebenwarmen Bilde
Blieb nur das Gerippe mir zuruck.
Ach! Nur in dem Feenland der Lieder
Lebt noch deine goldne Spur. (Schiller, 2005)

Despite his lament about the decadence of the world, Schiller mentions in his poem the *fairyland of songs* and its *golden tracks.* And this is where this article will pick up from. The life the four characters - Alice, Eileen, Felix and Simon – lead is by no means obnoxious. In spite of stress, depression, misunderstandings, family issues, they keep striving, loving, finding their way in an unstable environment. In spite of everything, this chaotic, polluted, insecure space is a beautiful world.

The plot of the book is quite simple: it deals with four characters and the relationships between them. Apparently, there is no leading character and the four main chapters of the book are equally divided between the four narrative strings. The events constituting the storyline, although fictitious, depict the place we all know: one that is ruled by technology, climate change, class dynamics, the difficulty in relating to people.

The novel is triggered by Alice's retirement at the countryside following her nervous breakdown and treatment in a psychiatric institution. Retreating in this quiet coastal town – three hours away from Dublin – Alice, an already famous novelist, hopes to escape fame, talks about her books, annoying questions. She finds that living in the pristine Irish countryside with rabbits and birds outside her window suits her: *It is nice to be surrounded by nature and to feel enclosed by that. It gives me mental space to do what I like to do." (Rooney, 2022:18)* At the same time, she enters a strange relationship with Felix, a warehouse worker, who hardly understands her existential problems. Alice keeps a regular email correspondence with her former college mate and close friend, Eileen. They engage in very interesting intellectual discussions, oftentimes real debates. Both of the women, who are in their late twenties, are healing after failed relationships. Eileen, who works hard as an editor for a literary magazine, spies on her ex-boyfriend on social media, can hardly pay her rent in Dublin or make ends meet. Her childhood friend, Simon, a political advisor, comes from a wealthy family. The two start an amorous relationship with ups and downs, but finally end up together just as Alice seems to find her peace in Felix's companionship.

In an interview for "The Guardian", Rooney admits that plot is almost beside the point in her novels, her real and serious concern being the characters and their 'wellbeing': *The hardest disappointment is in feeling that I've failed to do justice to my characters. I hate the idea of thrusting them out into the cold hard light of publicity to be jeered at and reviled. They really do mean as much to me as if they were real. (The Guardian, June 2022).* The feeling the reader gets when reading Rooney's novels – not only "Beautiful World Where Are You" but also her first and second novels "Conversations with Friends" and "Normal People" - is one of real people like ourselves having the same queries and troubles. The books do not describe 'real events', but they do deal with real emotions and experiences in the form of fictional characters and imagined happenings. When Alice and Felix first meet on a blind date, Felix asks the novelist what she writes about: *And what are your books about?* Her answer comes right away: *I don't know, she said. People. (Rooney, 2022: 13)* Rooney acknowledges that her major concerns as a novelist are people and their lives. She focuses on thoughts and issues of her characters' age and generation: relationships, ambition, identity, politics, sex, motherhood, friendship or the impending destruction of the earth. (The New Yorker, 2022)

While writing "Emma", Jane Austen declared that she was creating a character that no one but herself would like. This is not totally true, but there are debates and controversies around Austen's character, the spoilt matchmaking Emma Woodhouse. Contrarywise, Sally Rooney wants her readers to love the characters she brings to life: *It is with foolish and necessary optimism that I say things like: 'There's this guy you're going to love him.' ...I content myself with the hope that behind all the noise and distraction, in a quiet interior somewhere, someone is encountering that character, and they do love him. The beauty of that kind of love: That's what makes me want to write novels. (The Guardian, June 2022)* In truth, Rooney's characters are extremely lovable, they are flesh and blood young people whom we know in real life. Alice and Eileen are two intelligent and educated Irish young women, conscious of their abilities and almost always the smartest in the room.

Rooney also pointed out that she had no intention to write about herself and things that happened to her, but we can't help associating her novelist-protagonist, Alice, with their creator. They both are 'miracle' novelists, who became famous almost overnight and have difficulty in fighting with this new celebrity status. Alice, who is twenty-nine years old,

struggles with anxiety and retires at a quiet place: *I can't believe I have to tolerate these things – having articles written about me, and seeing my photograph on the internet, and reading comments about myself…it makes me miserable, and I don't want to live this kind of life. (Rooney, 2022: 54)* When her first novel was published, she only wanted to make enough money for the next one, but found herself famous and exposed to the public lens. She hopes to herself a Marxist, but her statement remains true only on a theoretical level, given that she is wealthy and lives more than comfortably (she can afford to profess socialist ideas). On the other hand, like a true millennial, she appeals to Tinder to meet Felix, a warehouse worker who will become her new lover. The class distinction and the education level of the two are part of Alice's desperate attempt to make a new life for herself. Romantic relationships mean a lot to her, just as they are important to her best friend, Eileen. The discrepancy between Alice and Felix comes to a tipping point when she invites him to join her on her trip to Rome where she is invited to talk about her work. Ironically, the end of the novel brings the two couples together: *…I just remind myself of the fact that Felix is alive, and you are alive, and Simon is, and then I feel wonderfully and almost frighteningly lucky, and I pray that nothing bad will happen to any of you. (Rooney, 2022:331)* A state of serenity and contentment has been reached.

Eileen, the other protagonist of the novel is also trying hard to get over a romantic relationship, but keeps searching for information on the internet about her ex-boyfriend, only to torture herself. The two young women exchange emails confessing their angsts and frustrations. Eileen, who works as an editor, feels that her efforts are inefficient and worthless: *Most frequently she was inserting two full stops into the name 'WH Auden', in order to standardize its appearance as 'W.H. Auden'. (Rooney, 2022: 19)* Like her friend, she is dissatisfied with her work and life, but unlike Alice, she has money problems which make things even worth. She is an eager reader of classics and reads during her lunch breaks while eating a sandwich or standing on the bus, while travelling to work. When she is introduced, she is reading "The Karamazov Brothers", but "Emma", "Anna Karenina", "The Wings of the Dove", "The Golden Bowl" or "In Search of Lost Time" are also mentioned. The life-changing event of her life is her on and off romantic relationship with Simon, which - like in the case of the other couple - is marked by class and financial disparity. Against all odds, Eileen's insecurity and obsession with Simon, a charismatic young man indeed, turn into a genuine love relationship, as the end of the novel finds them married and expecting a child: *I know it's not the life you imagined for me, Alice – buying a house and having children with a boy I grew up with. It's not the life I used to imagine for myself either. But it's the life I have, the only one. And as I write you this message, I'm very happy. (Rooney, 2022, 337)* This is the last email of the novel and the glaring proof that life in this 'beautiful world' is worthwhile living.

Apart from giving 'real' life to her characters, Rooney made a point of changing in "Beautiful World Where are You" the narrative technique of her first two novels. The third person objective narrative is just an appearance and reminds the advised reader at least of Jane Austen's technique – the one she invented, as most critics agree – the free indirect style. Many authors, including modernists and contemporary novelists like Sally Rooney – have readily adopted the free indirect discourse. And this because it proved to be a magical wand which transports the reader into the heads and hearts of the characters. Paradoxically, the third person objectivity turns into subjectivity or, better, a loving introspection into the characters' inner life. And here we are again: Rooney cares a lot about her characters and depicts them with tenderness and empathy: *Their conversation seemed to have had some effect on them both, but it was impossible to decipher the nature of the effect, its meaning, how it felt to them at that moment, if it was something shared between them or something about which they felt differently. (Rooney, 2022:126)* The author probes her 'normal people's' psyche, and at the same time, they are watched from a safe distance.

In addition, the linking element plotwise is the bond between the two young women, the friendship they try hard to keep alive by writing long, meaningful and uncensored emails which bring the purely subjective element to the foreground, thus enriching the narrative design of "Beautiful World". They freely deal with their respective love troubles, sex life, uncertainties, uneasiness in family relationships. The emails are those parts of the novel in which Alice and Eileen best reveal themselves to the reader as empathetic intellectuals preoccupied by the ways of the world: *Alice, do you think the problem of the contemporary novel is simply the problem of contemporary life? I agree it seems vulgar, decadent, even epistemically violent, to invest energy in the trivialities of sex and friendship when human civilization is facing collapse. (Rooney, 2022:111)* It is undoubtedly significant that Rooney chose emails and not letters as means of communication between the two women. They are a sign of the time we live in. Letters can get lost, they can be frayed into pieces, they can age and become indecipherable. Emails, in contrast, autosave in a drafts folder during their composition, and they arrive at the instant of being sent. Moreover, every email is visible and can be searched at all times by both the sender and the receiver. They are part of contemporary life, although there are even more recent and sophisticated means of communication these days.

Sally Rooney chose as an epigraph for her novel a fragment from Natalia Ginzburg's essay "My Vocation". For the sake of being consistent with the first statement of this article, I will disagree with Ginzburg in the following excerpt: *But there is a corner of my mind in which I know very well what I am, which is a small writer, a very small writer. I swear I know it. But that doesn't matter much to me. (Ginzburg, My Vocation)* Extrapolating this assertion to Sally Rooney and "Beautiful World Where Are You", I consider that by writing this novel, she proved to be a great writer, and, even more importantly, the creator of a beautiful world populated by beautiful 'normal people' of our time, who speak our language, think most of our thoughts, and feel our feelings. The answer to Friedrich Schiller's question is after all: it is right here in front of our eyes. It is up to us to see it.

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