

**“Is It Possible We Could Develop an Alternative
Model of Loving Each Other?”: Character Dynamics
in Sally Rooney’s *Conversations with Friends***

Anniina Peltonen

Bachelor’s Thesis

Bachelor’s Degree, Department of English

School of Languages and Translation Studies

Faculty of Humanities

University of Turku

May 2025

The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

Bachelor's Thesis

Faculty of Humanities, Department of English:

Anniina Peltonen

Title of the thesis: "Is It Possible We Could Develop an Alternative Model of Loving Each Other?": Character Dynamics in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*

Number of pages: 21 pages

In my thesis I analyze the interpersonal dynamics in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017). *Conversations with Friends* revolves around the protagonist Frances who I use as an anchor and a link between other pivotal characters Bobbi, Nick and Melissa. The four grapple with secrets, lies and infidelity, these being themes I highlight in my analysis. In my thesis I argue that with this novel, Sally Rooney subtly makes a case for alternative relationship models as opposed to traditional monogamous relationships. As the title suggests, I focus on the theme of finding "an alternative model of loving each other" as the characters, especially Frances, come to terms with having romantic feelings and desires towards more than one person at once. I explore Frances's relationships through the lens of her bisexuality and discuss the ways in which she develops different dynamics with different love interests, Bobbi and Nick respectfully.

Key words: Sally Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, adultery, communication, relationships, monogamy, bisexuality.

Table of contents

1	Introduction	5
2	Frances and Bobbi	7
2.1	High School Sweethearts: Frances and Bobbi's Romantic Relationship as Portrayed by Frances's Narration	7
2.2	Bobbi as a Spokeperson for Unconventional Romantic Relationships	9
3	Power Dynamics between Frances and Nick	11
4	"The other Woman": Melissa and Frances	14
5	Happily ever after? Closure in <i>Conversations with Friends</i>	16
6	Conclusion	20
	References	

1 Introduction

The world is full of complicated relationships and arguably, these relationships, however flawed and messy they may be, are what make us human. The literary field of fiction has historically been keen to capture and bring these descriptions of complex relationships to the masses to enjoy and learn from. The renowned Irish novelist Sally Rooney brings such messy relationships to the forefront of all her novels, including *Conversations with Friends* (2018) which is the primary source of my thesis. In an interview Rooney is asked whether this novel is a love story, and she replies: “Yes actually, I think it is. It's not necessarily a conventional love story but it's certainly about what it means to love someone or more than one someone”, (Rooney 2019, 2:55). What makes the novel unconventional as a love story are its multifaceted characters and the interpersonal relationships they develop during the novel's time span. When I claim it is an unconventional story about love I mean in contrast to a boy-meets-girl monogamous heterosexual story where the protagonists live happily ever after what the romance novel shelves are full of. *Conversations with Friends* centers around Frances who, while majoring in English, performs spoken word with her friend and ex-girlfriend Bobbi through which they get to know an older married couple, Nick and Melissa. In a novel where relatively little happens plot-wise, Frances and Bobbi develop deeper relationships with the couple, Frances with Nick and Bobbi with Melissa respectively. *Conversations with Friends* portrays various types of love: friendly and platonic love, romantic love and even unrequited love, most of which find an interesting and unconventional way to appear in the novel.

In *Conversations with Friends* Bobbi and Nick are described as very different characters, in many ways they can be even the opposites of each other, while both being the recipients of Frances's love and attention. In my thesis, I aim to discuss the different dynamics Frances is described to have with Bobbi and Nick. As I pointed out earlier, Sally Rooney herself sees this as a story about love and hence I mainly focus on the romantic side of these relationships between Frances and Bobbi as well as Frances and Nick respectfully. It should be noted that *Conversations with Friends* covers these romantic relationships in varying lengths and hence there is more direct coverage on Frances's relationship with Nick than with Bobbi. This is because Frances's first romantic relationship with Bobbi takes place before the novel's events, although the author has included flashbacks to their high school relationship and Frances does reminisce their romance in the novel. Frances and Bobbi also reignite their relationship's romantic side again towards the end of the novel. I aim to not,

even by accident, compare Frances and Bobbi's platonic friendship to Frances and Nick's romantic one and my aim is not to distinguish which of Frances's romantic relationships is better as such as I do not believe this rivalry to be the point of *Conversations with Friends* at its very core. Instead I will point out which factors lead to these different dynamics between Frances and Bobbi and Frances and Nick.

Furthermore, I analyse the unconventionality and future possibilities of these relationship that Rooney writes about. As the title of my thesis suggests, I make the argument that with this novel Rooney makes a case for a non-conventional relationship model to take place between Frances, Bobbi, Nick and Melissa as opposed to traditional monogamous relationships. I also argue that the best alternative for these characters romantically is not a traditional monogamous relationship. I analyse where these relationships fall in a Western society that values and emphasises monogamous heteronormative relationships.

It should be noted that the novel *Conversations with Friends* has been since its publication been turned into a television adaptation with the same title but in my thesis, I only cover Sally Rooney's novel and not the tv-series.

As stated before, *Conversations with Friends* is not a plot-heavy novel which is very much in line with Rooney's other literary works: she tends to focus more on the complex characters and their interpersonal dynamics. Frances, the protagonist, is an observant and somewhat reserved literary student in her early twenties. All while struggling with her health, finances as well as her relationship with her father, Frances studies at Trinity College and works part-time in a book publishing agency. In the very beginning of *Conversations with Friends* Frances and her friend, ex-partner and co-performer, Bobbi, meet Melissa at a spoken word event where Melissa then comes up with the idea of writing a profile of Frances and Bobbi. Melissa and Bobbi are immediately drawn to each other, meanwhile Frances is more so just accompanying Bobbi while they visit Melissa's house later on. There Frances meets Nick, an actor and Melissa's husband and this begins a set complicated complicated relationships I will now analyse further.

I begin by analysing Frances's relationship with Bobbi, as this is the interpersonal dynamic that appears first in the novel and is constant in Frances's life. This is followed by an analysis of the unconventional nature and repercussions of Frances and Nick's relationship. I also include an analysis of the relationship between Frances and Melissa. Lastly, I discuss the quote in the thesis title in more detail and explain what this might mean in the context of Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*. This analysis is then followed by a conclusion.

2 Frances and Bobbi

In this section, I discuss Frances's relationship with Bobbi. I begin by analysing their romantic relationship within the restricted scope that the novel allows as the coverage on Frances and Bobbi's past romance is limited Frances's subjective narrating. Then I move onto analysing Bobbi's position in discussions about non-conventional romances and non-monogamy.

2.1 High School Sweethearts? Frances and Bobbi's Romantic Relationship as Portrayed by Frances's Narration

Frances and Bobbi were what you could call high school sweethearts and have stayed friends since their breakup. As stated above, the novel's narrative timeline does not cover the ins and outs of their romantic relationship while the relationship actually takes place in real time. Instead what the reader comes to know about their relationship, which lasted over a year, is through flashbacks and Frances' memories. Using a first-person narrator, *Conversations with Friends* is a story told from France's point of view and therefore highlights her personal and by default, subjective, experience. Frances describes Bobbi's personality as sharp, outspoken and quick-witted.

As previously stated, Bobbi and Nick do occasionally appear as complete opposites of each other which makes Frances's affection for both all the more interesting. Whereas Nick is often quiet, withdrawn and easily conforming to the people that surround him Bobbi appears to be quite the opposite: she has a strong will and isn't afraid to engage in heated discussions no matter the subject. For most of the novel Bobbi seems to hold Nick in contempt. It is safe to say that Bobbi does not see Nicks through the same, perhaps rose-coloured, classes as Frances sees him: Bobbi views Nick's as a bland and boring straight man who is not worthy of Frances's time and effort. I conduct multiple reasons for this dislike on Bobbi's side. Bobbi develops a crush for Melissa quite early in the novel and perhaps does not see Nick as worthy of Melissa's affections either and even views him as a trophy husband.

Frances and Bobbi started dating in secondary school and Frances describes this as "the first real fun I ever had", (Rooney [2017] 2018, 8). After a year or so together Bobbi break ups with Frances: the novel does not provide a detailed explanation for this aside from their unhappiness as a couple, specifically Bobbi's unhappiness. Their friendship after their romantic relationship dos not come without emotional consequences: "She cultivates a deeply affectionate friendship with Bobbi, but has not coped with her sense of humiliation after

becoming her abandoned partner. Frances silently resents her need to seek Bobbi's validation", Carregal-Romero (2023, 2017) explains. At some points of the novel Frances and Bobbi live together due to Bobbi's difficult family situation as her parents are amidst a divorce. She ends up moving out due to her and Frances's rocky friendship that is clearly a difficult thing to balance, especially for Frances who seems to have not fully gotten over their relationship.

Conversations with Friends is a piece of literary fiction that focuses on its characters rather than being plot heavy. Yet the novel has a few turning points in terms of the plot, most of these being moments of conflict between the four characters. One of these conflicts happens when Frances uses Bobbi's affections as a way of making Nick notice her. Another happens when Frances accuses Bobbi of being jealous of Nick. Bobbi comments on Frances's antics being "so stereotypically homophobic to accuse a gay woman of being jealous of men, which i know you know" (Rooney [2017] 2018, 81). Perhaps the biggest conflict between Frances and Bobbi happens when Melissa tells Bobbi about a to-be-published short story Frances has written about Bobbi, more specifically Bobbi during their time of dating which Bobbi herself is not happy about. Frances wrote this as a means of working through her confusing feelings about Bobbi in order to construct a straightforward version of what happened between them: "a story which characterized Bobbi as a mystery so total I couldn't endure her, a force I couldn't subjugate with my will, and the love of my life" Rooney [2017] 2018, 224). Later she goes on:

The figure in the story was recognisably Bobbi, her parents recognisable as her parents, myself identifiably myself. No one who knew us could fail to see Bobbi in the story. It wasn't an unflattering portrait, exactly. It emphasised the domineering aspects of Bobbi's personality and of my own, because the story was about personal dominance. (Rooney [2017] 2018, 243)

Conversational dominance appears as a key theme between Frances and Bobbi as well, although it is even more highlighted between Frances and Nick as I later explain. This need or desire to intellectually dominate a conversation stems from Frances's feeling of inadequacy compared to Bobbi and Nick. Even though Bobbi is Frances's peer "Frances' understanding of the world and her place in it is inflected by her self-image as an economic outsider compared with her wealthy friend and ex-girlfriend, Bobbi" (Gray 2020, 76).

2.2 Bobbi as a Spokesperson for Unconventional Romantic Relationships

As previously stated, Bobbi is a very opinionated character. This difference can be striking as opposed to the more reserved and quieter personalities of both Frances and Nick. This goes for Bobbi's opinions about love and relationships as well: she is headstrong and vocal about the fact that love and romantic relationships, as they appear for most people, are a social construct rooted in patriarchy and heteronormativity:

She said that monogamy was based on a commitment model, which served the needs of men in patrilineal societies by allowing them to pass property to their genetic offspring, traditionally facilitated by sexual entitlement to a wife. Non-monogamy could be based on an alternative model completely, Bobbi said. Something more like spontaneous consent. (Rooney [2017] 2018, 252)

Non-monogamy is an umbrella term used to describe “the principle or practice of engaging consensually in romantic or sexual relationships not limited to an exclusive, monogamous partnership” (OED, s.v. “non-monogamy,” n.). Despite mentioning non-monogamy and spontaneous consent, Bobbie does not label her own preferred commitment model further. Yet it clearly strays away from the traditional heterosexual monogamous relationship model. Bobbi also continuously mentions having a crush on Melissa, although she is taken. Initially Frances takes this as Bobbi being joking. Bobbi's stance on the topic vastly differs from Frances's and that of wider society: “It would depress me to sleep with someone who loved someone else. [...] I just don't think I would enjoy being someone's second choice” (Rooney [2017] 2018, 147). The way Frances sees the situation with Nick, is that if Nick Melissa whilst being in love with Frances, that must automatically mean that Frances is the second and worse choice, more likely to be tossed to the wayside. “You can love more than one person”, Bobbi states to which Frances replies “That's arguable” (Rooney [2017] 2018, 147). At this stage of the novel Bobbi is not yet aware about Frances and Nick's romantic involvement and only knows about Frances's crush on Nick. Hence Bobbi's comment is not directed at what Frances, Nick and Melissa should do but rather an overall remark that romantic love can exist despite an already existing previous love and even *co-exist* with it. Frances's response in the previous quote goes to show that she might not be quite as on board as Bobbi is with the idea, not yet at least. “Why is it any different from having more than one friend? You're friends with me and you also have other friends, does that mean you don't

really value me?”, Bobbi goes on to explain to Frances (Rooney [2017] 2018, 147-148). After stating that she does not in fact have other friends (Rooney [2017] 2018, 147-148), Frances drops the conversation topic. By naming Bobbi “a spokesperson for unconventional romantic relationships”, I do not argue that that Bobbi tries to “sell” the concept of non-monogamy to others but rather she quite naturally introduces the idea to other by talking about her own ideologies. Although Rooney at no point in the novel specifically states what relationship model the four focal characters should follow, I argue that even the conclusion of a character that is positive and almost anarchistic about non-monogamy is a nod to the direction or more non-traditional relationships.

3 Power Dynamics between Frances and Nick

Frances and Nick's romantic relationship is interestingly layered with different power dynamics. Frances is a young college student who is struggling for money meanwhile Nick is much older than her, wealthy, married and has a semi-successful acting career. As Gray (2020, 76) explains, that for Frances Nick "signifies all that she politically detests" which makes her affections for a wealthy and privileged white man not only a source conflict with other people but also an internal ethical conflict for Frances. These differences in their lives create a multifaceted dynamic which the pairing struggle to balance through the entirety of the novel.

One of the factors that creates hierarchical relationships between the characters of *Conversations with Friends* is money. Frances is a poor student who to a large extent relies on her father's monthly allowance in order to survive her day-to-day life. Frances's financial situation steadily declines for a large part of the book as her father's struggles with alcoholism become more and more paramount. "With the help of Nick's money, she swaps dependence from her (unreliable) father to dependence on a sexual partner", Darling (2021, 541) suggests and by doing so draws a parallel between Frances's father and Nick.

In comparison to Frances is from a wealthy background and has accumulated enough money, either from his family or in his career, to be able to afford a house and an otherwise wealthy lifestyle that includes for example, travel. This wealth discrepancy goes on to be a familiar theme in Rooney's work as she covers it in even more detail in *Normal People*, released in 2018. Frances and Nick's wealth differences pose ethical questions upon their relationship, which they even touch on a few times: "I have money that I don't urgently need, and I would rather let you had it. But the transaction of giving it to you would bother me... I think I struggle enough with the ethics of our relationship already, he said. So giving you money would probably push it too far for me", (Rooney [2017] 2018, 198) Nick goes on to explain to Frances. It is clear that the pair struggle with the idea of introducing exchanges of money into a sexual relationship concerned that it might alter the scales of power or make the romance more unethical. Further on in the novel Nick, by his own initiative, goes on to lend money to Frances in order for her to buy food. Frances wants the pair to make it very clear that this is a loan in order not turn the relationship into a transaction.

Another important factor that creates a power dynamic between Frances and Nick is the rather obvious one, age. Frances is 21 years old meanwhile Nick is 32 years old and turns 33 by the end of it. Even though this age gap of 11 or so years is from the more moderate or

conservative end of the spectrum in terms of age gap relationship. That being said, this question of age does still affect their relationship as it places the characters in very different points in their lives. Nick has had time to accumulate positions and experiences in life that Frances has not been able to yet due to her young age if nothing else: a somewhat steady career, money, a marriage, and a house.

Perhaps because of this underdog-position of sorts Frances tends to look for power in other aspects of their relationship. In an attempt to maybe tip the scales of power in her direction, Frances tries to dominate the relationship in other ways, mostly through conversation. “He said it was healthy for us to try and correct the power disparity, though he added that he didn’t think we would ever be able to do it completely” (Rooney [2017] 2018, 246), Frances explains. Nick refers to his submissive personality as balancing the power disparity between the which speaks to his awareness about it. This conversational or intellectual domination is deliberate and a conscious choice from Frances, made known to the reader as well. “You just like women who can wreck you intellectually” (Rooney [2017] 2018, 245), Frances says to Nick and he agrees, as he often does. Waterman (2022, 232) calls this “inter-mediation of sexuality and intelligence”, referring to Rooney’s tendency to build sexual tension between love interests through intelligent and witty conversation. This phenomenon is clearly present in *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* alike. “At the core of Frances’ initial communicative incapacity is the moral premium she places on dialogical ‘success’”, Gray (2020, 77) explains referring to how emotional vulnerability and understanding are not Frances’s main objectives in a conversation. Instead she places greater importance on dominating said conversation, using her language and argumentation skills acquired as an English student. Gray (2020, 77) goes on to say “Conversation, for Frances, is imagined as a temporally distinct, level playing field: an arena where she can best those who unfairly surpass her in material wealth”. As explained, Nick is older, wealthier and more privileged than Frances, but conversation is an area where she rises above him. Resulting in conflict in the novel, Frances is explained to approach conversation with those who are wealthier and more privileged “from an inguistically armed, consistently ironic perspective” (Gray 2020, 76).

Much of Frances and Nick’s romance is built through online conversation as the adulterous nature of the relationship limits the chances of Frances and Nick physically seeing each other. Many of Frances and Bobbi’s more heart-to-heart conversations take place through email as well. “Throughout *Conversations with Friends*, the internet is used to maintain, create, and challenge power dynamics within relationships” Darling (2021, 545)

explains. This use of email and instant messaging apps gives Frances her much desired power within a conversation: she has time to think about a response and a chance to draft and delete a message before sending it.

While there are obvious differences in Frances and Melissa's characters and their respective relationships with Nick, interestingly their characterisation of Nick has apparent similarities: they both view Nick as emotionally submissive, conforming and kind to a fault. I argue that this is an interesting piece of middle ground that they are able to find amidst conflict and jealousy. The opinion might be shared by the women in Nick's life, but this opinion is not entirely a positive characterisation about Nick as both Frances and Melissa find his emotional submissiveness frustrating at times.

“You will not be able to draw a sustainable sense of self-respect from this relationship you're in. I'm sure you find his total acquiescence charming now, but over the course of a marriage it actually becomes exhausting. Fighting with him is impossible because he's pathologically submissive, & you can't scream at him without hating yourself. I know because today I screamed at him for a long time. [...] Even if he figured out that I was planning his murder he wouldn't bring it up in case it upset me. I've become so used to seeing him as pathetic & even contemptible that I forgot anybody else could love him. Other women have always lost interest once they got to know him. But not you. You love him, don't you? He tells me your father was an alcoholic, and so was mine. I wonder if we gravitate toward Nick because he gives us a sense of control that was lacking in childhood”. (Rooney [2017] 2018, 198)

In the quote above, Melissa touches on what could be called by “daddy issues” in everyday conversation. Daddy issues refer to the idea that a person, usually a woman, would gravitate toward certain kind of men in sexual and romantic relationships. This could be either finding someone who reminds one of their father or someone completely opposite. “The most popular opinion is that women who date men that are 10 years or more their senior have an unhealthy relationship with their father”, (Skentelbery & Fowler, 2016, 142). “It is believed that AGRs will not last long or be widely accepted, they are unrealistic and based on money or resources, the partners have nothing in common and they will not be happy” (Skentelbery & Fowler, 2016, 142), AGRs meaning age gap relationships. This study on same age and age gap relationships and the attachment styles in said relationships found no proof that women in age gap relationships would have daddy issues, (Skentelbery & Fowler, 2016, 145).

4. “The Other Woman”: Frances and Melissa

As stated before, throughout the novel Nick is married to Melissa. Despite the emotional turmoil between the characters, this marriage is a constant whether it is happy or not. Frances does not appear particularly fond of Melissa, although it remains unclear to whether this is particularly due to Melissa’s personality or simply the fact that Frances is in love with Melissa’s long-term partner. Or perhaps the fact that Melissa seems close with France’s ex-girlfriend Bobbi who Frances has unresolved feelings for? Despite this Frances and Melissa develop at least a surface level friendship and work on writing projects together. This relationship is most likely kept alive due to work, France’s close proximity with Melissa’s husband and Bobbi who is certainly keener on Melissa than Frances is. Due to the nature of their relationship, Frances does grapple with guilt about keeping a secret from Melissa. This guilt does not completely go away with the knowledge that Melissa herself has had multiple affairs during her relationship with Nick: “The marriage has actually survived multiple affairs, I just haven’t been involved in any of them” (Rooney [2017] 2018, 70), Nick responds to Frances when she expresses worrying about whether she would be a homewrecker amidst their marriage.

Themes of jealousy and adultery and the concept of “the other woman” are commonly used tropes in literature, television and music alike. They are used in *Conversations with Friends* as well though I argue that Rooney does manage to provide a fresh perspective and nuance to the conversation about adultery which generally speaking tends follow the same pattern. Amidst the struggles in her personal and romantic life however, Frances herself struggles to see this mentioned nuance. “She sort of superimposes a familiar narrative on what’s going on in her personal life. That makes it easy for her to make sense those the other people in her life she knows the role that she’s playing. She’s the other woman; she’s like the younger mistress and Nick is like the older man and Melissa sort of the betrayed wife who Frances sees as quite cold”. (Rooney 2019, 13:50) “With her queer credentials and radical politics, Frances is an unlikely protagonist in a novel of adultery, that most clichéd of genres. Nothing could be more bourgeois than an affair, or more banal than being the other woman, as Frances is all too aware”, Schwartz (2017) explains. Both Frances and Melissa grapple with the stereotype of Nick having a young mistress, making them both feel insecure in their relationships with Nick for different reasons. “I admit I’m threatened by your extreme youth. It’s very shocking thinking about your own husband being into younger women” (Rooney [2017] 2018, 236), Melissa admits to Frances. Frances, too, openly admits her jealousy

towards Melissa: “My discovery that I was in love with Nick, not just infatuated but deeply personally attached to him in a way that would have lasting consequences for my happiness, had prompted me to feel a new kind of jealousy toward Melissa”. (Rooney [2017] 2018, 201)

Frances and Melissa go through the majority of the novel co-existing in Nick’s life seemingly without conflict but in secrecy behind Melissa’s back. In the second part of the novel, Nick decides to tell Melissa that Nick has been dating Frances and in fact wants to keep on doing so while being married to Melissa. While Nick does not disclose exactly how he wants to maintain the two separate relationships, he openly admits to wanting to keep being romantically involved with both of them. In Frances’s experience Nick’s confession to Melissa affects Frances and Nick’s relationship in multifaceted ways: Nick appears more romantic and endearing which makes Frances happy, yet she feels more vulnerable now that Melissa knows. Until this point Frances and Nick’s relationship has been somewhat on and off and funnily enough this coming clean to Melissa solidifies Frances and Nick’s relationship in a way. This confession by Nick also leads to one of the major conflicts in the novel as Melissa sends Frances an email airing out all of her emotions and opinions that have gone untold so far.

Melissa plays a key role in the novel although her character is mostly brought up in relation to other characters, she is the reason for Frances’s jealousy, she is Bobbi’s crush and Nick’s wife. Her voice is not necessarily heard on its own. This email is a rare glance at Melissa’s stream of thought as her opinions are not as forefront in the rest of the novel. The last chapter of *Conversations with Friends*, which perhaps provides closure to Frances and Nick, leaves the fate of Melissa somewhat unclear and she is not granted much agency at the end. Or alternatively her assumed agency over how the various relationships in the novel continue would only appear after the novel’s scope of time. Bobbi, Frances and Nick all comment on non-monogamy in some capacity while Melissa does not comment on the subject one way or another. With these question marks it remains unclear what Melissa’s dynamic with Frances and on the other hands with Nick turns out to be.

5. Happily Ever After? Closure in *Conversations with Friends*

Communication and honesty are key factors in any successful relationship, whether romantic or platonic. However, the need for clear and open communication is amplified when the relationship is non-monogamous as more people and therefore more wants, needs and feelings are at play. Consensual non-monogamy or alternatively ethical non-monogamy, which can be considered “fuller” explanations of non-monogamy as explained in section 2. They place vast emphasis on communication, honesty and consent and the success or downfall of a non-monogamous relationship relies on these key factors. “Importantly, this non-exclusivity is always accompanied by the informed consent of all parties involved. Consensual non-monogamy strongly emphasizes the issue of ethics and separates it from infidelity and cheating on one’s partner” (Lipnicka, 2023, 160-161). Lipnicka’s explanation of non-exclusivity is not how the actions of Frances, Bobbi, Nick and Melissa can be described as instead they largely fall into the scope of infidelity. It should be made clear that I do not argue *Conversations with Friends* to be a novel in which Frances, Bobbi, Nick and Melissa engage in *ethical* non-monogamous relationships with each other during the novel’s scope of time. *Conversations with Friends* is largely a story about infidelity and its consequences. My argument is that the relationship dynamics and the somewhat open ending as written by Rooney can be interpreted in a way that suggests an alternative relationship model for the four characters. And whether my argument of this potential non-monogamous relationship reigns true or not, it shall take place in the future, beyond the novel’s scope.

Western society is often not approving of non-monogamous relationships, a factor that might hinder one’s willingness to experiment or their openness to others about the subject. “In spite of presenting a society completely tolerant with “who to love”, Rooney shows the discrepancies arising from “how to love””, Alférez Mendía (2023, 155) analyses. By this she means that Rooney’s novels rarely showcase homophobia or attitudes against queer relationships, but non-traditional and non-monogamous relationship models are frowned upon. “What can be seen here is the still popular disbelief or mistrust in constructing relations that escape traditional social labels, which is another conventionality retained at present modern Ireland”, as Alférez Mendía (2023, 155) explains in relation to Frances and Bobbi’s university friends’ negative reaction to a conversation questioning monogamy.

“The night when you talked about monogamy I loved your intellect. I didn’t understand what you were trying to tell me. Maybe I’m a lot more stupid than either of us thought. When there were four of us I always thought in terms of couples anyway,

which threatened me, since all the possible couples that didn't involve me seemed so much more interesting than the ones that did. You and Nick, you and Melissa, even Nick and Melissa in their own way. But now I see that nothing consists of two people, or even three. My relationship with you is also produced by your relationship with Melissa, and with Nick, and with your childhood self etc., etc. [...] Is it possible we could develop an alternative model of loving each other? I'm not drunk. Please write back. I love you". (Rooney [2017] 2018, 299)

Apparently accepting Frances's apology e-mail, as seen above, Bobbi goes to France's apartment and says: "That was a weird email. But I love you too" (Rooney [2017] 2018, 300).

The traditional romance novel tends to provide the reader with a clear conclusion, where two people, in most novels a man and a woman, sail into the sunset together and live happily ever after despite previous obstacles and drama. As pointed out earlier *Conversations with Friends* is not a traditional romance novel despite being a love story and this distinction is further amplified by this lack of a simple and straightforward conclusion. I argue that the ending of the novel is left somewhat open by Rooney on purpose. At the end of the novel Frances and Bobbi are in a relationship of sorts while Frances and Nick have not been in contact for a while. As Nick attempts to call his wife Melissa, he accidentally calls Frances, and they end up reconnecting. Frances explains her relationship to Nick as follows: "Well, she's not my girlfriend as such. We're sleeping together, but I think it's a way of testing the limits of best friendship. I actually don't know what we're doing. It seems to be working okay", to which Nick responds, "That's very anarchist of you", (Rooney [2017] 2018, 314-315). It remains unconfirmed whether the Frances's and the others find a clear resolution for how to co-exist and manage their different relationships in the best way possible. Any attempt to firmly determine the futures of Frances, Nick, Bobbi and Melissa's relationship is pure speculation and open for the reader's subjective interpretation. Yet I argue that the ending of *Conversations with Friends* is filled with promise and hope. This I argue because after a break from a highly emotionally charged situation, Frances and Nick are able to communicate with a level of honesty and emotional vulnerability that they have failed to show to each other in the novel's earlier stages.

The ending of *Conversations with Friends* does not suggest any one single correct relationship model for its characters to continue their lives with. Still I argue that it implies some kind of a non-monogamous relationship, because as the novel has showed, no attempt at monogamous relationships between the characters has lasted the test of time. When with Nick, Frances still lingers for Bobbi and vice versa and Nick still loves Melissa despite his affections for Frances. And despite having a crush on Melissa, Bobbi still has unresolved

feeling for Frances. Sally Rooney makes a convincing case for the four characters to create alternative ways of loving each other, as Frances suggests Rooney [2017] 2018, 299. Whether or not Rooney blatantly suggests that the Frances, Bobbi, Nick and Melissa should form some kind of a consensually non-monogamous arrangement with each other, remains perhaps in the readers hands to decide but as can be seen in the block quote from Frances above, it is by no means an impossible outcome.

The novel is laced with secrecy and even lies, yet the ending provided much needed honesty between Frances and Nick. After battling with a multitude of symptoms, Frances is diagnosed with endometriosis but decides to keep this information to herself. During Frances and Nick's phone call in the last chapter of the novel, Frances tells Nick about the diagnosis and asks his opinion on whether she should tell Bobbi about the diagnosis too. He answers:

“I think you should tell her. You can't control what she thinks of you anyway. You know, sick or healthy, you're never going to be able to do that. What you're doing now is deceiving her just for the illusion of control, which probably isn't worth it”.
(Rooney [2017] 2018, 317)

I argue that this nod towards Frances's honesty can be seen as almost a metaphor and a new beginning for the novel's characters. This “illusion of control” has been the reason why Frances's and Nick especially have been so reluctant to tell the truth about their feelings, to each other as well as to themselves. This newfound calling for honesty can be interpreted as a turning point because so far, all relationships have been more or less affected by dishonesty. “Much of *Conversations* revolves around silenced issues that, when finally unveiled, help Frances develop a more positive, psychologically healthy relationship with herself and others”, Carregal-Romero (2023, 218) explain. This new-found honesty and straightforwardness lays the groundwork for more successful future relationships. The closing chapter of *Conversations with Friends* provides the reader with an interesting quote:

Things and people move around me, taking positions in obscure hierarchies, participating in systems I never knew about and never would. A complex network of objects and concepts. You live through certain things before you understand them. You can't always take the analytical position. (Rooney [2017] 2018, 321)

This description by Frances is written in an abstract, train-of-thought style that is not otherwise vastly present in the novel. This quote provides a lot to unpack about the novel's ending. I view that these hierarchies and systems Frances refers to are interpersonal

relationships between the four focal characters and perhaps their different relationship types and models. I believe the quote's last sentence to refer to how irrationally people can act when they are in love: it might be that understanding them requires one's own experience and now after unsuccessful attempts at relationships with both Bobbi and Nick, she can try again with a fresh perspective and more knowledge about how these relationships could work better.

Conclusion

Conversations with Friends portrays a modern and somewhat unconventional love story. As proven by my analysis, Frances develops and sustains different kinds of dynamics with Bobbi and Nick respectfully. Although these dynamics are obviously different to the reader, similarities can be found as well, and I argue that it cannot and should not be stated which of these romantic relationships is better as such as the novel at its core is not about a rivalry between Bobbi and Nick. As argued earlier, this hierarchical evaluation of Frances's relationships with Bobbi and Nick respectfully would do a disservice to *Conversations with Friends* which with great nuance suggests that perhaps a traditional monogamous relationship is not the best alternative for all. As mentioned earlier, this nudge in the direction of non-monogamy is done in a very subtle manner by Rooney as she does not obviously state it in the closing chapters of *Conversations with Friends*, rather it lies in the underbelly of the novel. Rooney's novel proves that these two relationships, however different from each other, are both sustainable and can co-exist with each other, perhaps against all odds. This co-existence, however, requires honesty and clear communication. As stated in this paper, these relationships are most at risk when communication is lacking, and secrets are kept. Despite a somewhat open ending that leaves the details open for interpretation, Rooney manages to provide the reader with a happy ending despite the lack of a traditional romance novel ending where a couple go on to live happily ever after. Jealousy, secrets and hidden desires complicate the relationships between Frances, Bobbi, Melissa and Nick but at the end a somewhat satisfying ending is provided to the reader. Much is left for the reader to determine: how Frances, Bobbi, Nick and Melissa go on with their lives and what relationship models would be best suitable surely divide opinions. Yet, Rooney in the least presents an alternative for traditional monogamy in a story that highlights varying opinions and experiences around the modern and interesting theme.

References

- Alfárez Mendía, Sofía. 2023. "The Continuum of Irish Female Sexuality in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*: A Contradicted Ireland." *Estudios Irlandeses*, 18, no. 18: 148-160. <https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2023-11443>
- Caneda-Cabrera, M. Teresa, and Carregal-Romero, José. 2023. *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak*. Cham: Springer Nature.
- Carregal-Romero, José. 2023. "Unspeakable Injuries and Neoliberal Subjectivities in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*." In *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak*, edited by M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera and José Carregal-Romero, 213-233. Cham: Springer Nature.
- Darling, Orlaith. 2021. "'It Was Our Great Generational Decision': Capitalism, the Internet and Depersonalization in Some Millennial Irish Women's Writing." *Critique - Bolingbroke Society* 62, no. 5: 538–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1835802>.
- Gray, Madeleine. 2020. "Making Her Time (and Time Again): Feminist Phenomenology and Form in Recent British and Irish Fiction Written by Women." *Contemporary Women's Writing* 14, no. 1: 66–83. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpaa014>.
- Lipnicka, Magdalena. 2023. "Beyond the Norm of Monogamy – Consensual Non-Monogamy as an Example of a 'Post-Modern' Relationship?" *Studia Socjologiczne*, no. 3, 2023, pp. 159–78, <https://doi.org/10.24425/sts.2023.147165>.
- Oxford English Dictionary. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1055393227>
- Rooney, Sally. [2017] 2018. *Conversations with Friends*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Rooney, Sally. 2019. "Sally Rooney on *Conversations with Friends*." Interviewed by Martin Krasnik. YouTube, 39:37. Accessed 19 January 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1S5bOdJq3U>.
- Schwartz, Alexandra. 2017. "A New Kind of Adultery Novel". *The New Yorker*. Accessed 14 April 2025. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/31/a-new-kind-of-adultery-novel>
- Skentelbery, Sara, and Darren Fowler. 2016. "Attachment Styles of Women-Younger Partners in Age-Gap Relationships". *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences* 10, no. 2: 142–147. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ebs0000064>
- Waterman, Sam. 2022. "Sally Rooney's Sapiosexuals." *Contemporary Literature* 63, no. 2: 230–68. <https://doi.org/10.3368/cl.63.2.230>.