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The Millennial Novel:
Examining a Generation Through Literature

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May 2024

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

After she published her first novel, *Conversations With Friends* (2017), the *New York Times* named Sally Rooney the “first great millennial author.”¹ Rooney, a Millennial born in 1991, rose quickly to literary prominence after she graduated from Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland.² Her first novel, *Conversations with Friends*, is a work of fiction that follows two young college students whose lives become intertwined with those of an older married couple. The book questions themes of platonic and romantic power dynamics, the fragility of monogamy, concerns of contemporary economic conditions, and pressing but invisible health conditions. All these themes and more came to be known as symptoms of the Millennial condition, and invited critics to label the book a ‘Millennial novel.’ In the *New York Times*, Elle Barry attempted to explain what makes Rooney and her work so Millennial:

Most notable, though, is [Rooney’s] word-of-mouth success. Her voice has been greeted as something identifiably new: the arrival of millennial fiction... And it is true, her characters are people we haven’t encountered much in print. They communicate through emails and instant messaging, but do not regard these as degraded forms: They do not just speak but compose their remarks, like characters in an Oscar Wilde play. They are skeptical of the ability of markets to provide people with a decent life... Standing at the threshold of adult life, they halt, failing to see any reason to proceed.³

In the opinion of Barry, Millennial fiction is categorized by its use of technology, the characters’ crafted remarks and their pessimism, and by the wariness of its characters in relation to the social and financial world they have inherited. A thoughtful description of Millennial fiction, this does not capture the categorization’s less complimentary connotations. When the term is brought up, easily consumed and mass-produced commercial fiction, such as that on the table at *Barnes & Noble* filled with paperbacks with cartoon covers, might perhaps come to mind.

¹ Berman, “Sally Rooney and the Art of the Millennial Novel.”

² Barry, “Greeted.”

³ Barry, “Greeted.”

Frequently dismissed as only a means for marketing, the label of ‘Millennial fiction’ triggers wariness of the genre in Rooney herself. In an interview with *The Guardian* she questions, “‘Is millennial an identity category...In what way? And how is it useful – politically, psychologically, socially?’”⁴ This thesis will seek to answer these questions. It not only examines why Millennial *is* an identity category, but it will also analyze Millennial fiction to understand its political uses by examining how it represents the divisions between social classes; its psychological uses, in which characters are on constant search for purpose and unable to find it through traditional means; and its social uses, by considering the distrust of platonic and romantic relationships in these works. A white Irish woman writing in English, Rooney may be the most famous but she is not the only author of Millennial fiction. By looking at an array of Millennial novels and their authors, I provide a well-rounded definition of the Millennial novel.

As reviewers of Rooney’s work demonstrate, ‘Millennial’ is an identity category that demarcates an age cohort, one that overlaps with other identity categories such as race, gender, or social class. A generation is more than simply demographics; it signifies traits and stereotypes that align with the social conditions of the generation’s time. In a review of Rooney’s *Normal People*, *Elle* magazine contends the novel “tackles millennial concerns with nineteenth-century wit...the millennial generation would no doubt be happy to accept [Rooney] as its spokesperson were she so inclined.”⁵ *Harper’s Magazine* similarly writes “[Rooney is] a master of the kind of millennial deadpan that appears to skewer a whole life and personality in a sentence or two.”⁶ When Rooney began writing her first novel about two young women trying to navigate complicated relationships, financial predicaments, and health scares, she could never have known

⁴ Brookes, “Sally Rooney on the hell of fame.”

⁵ Amazon, “Compilation.”

⁶ Amazon, “Compilation.”

that her own generation would rally behind her and that those not from her generation would also claim that she is the best of her age. Though writing tragic romances can hardly be considered anywhere near revolutionary, Rooney uses this familiar trope to demonstrate how her characters struggle socially, internally, and financially in a way that is relatable and recognizable to young adults right now.

One reviewer, this one from Generation Z, believes that Rooney's power comes from the way that her prose ruminates.⁷ On her first read of *Normal People*, she found the actions of certain characters incoherent. A few years later, she decided to reread Rooney's three novels; now four years older, the unnamed blogger admitted that there is more substance to Rooney's frustrating characters than she had given them credit for when she was sixteen years old. Commending Rooney, the reviewer explains Rooney's uniquely brave writing style: "Instead of flinching away from dating her books with technology, she offers specific references to emails, texting, and even Facebook, embracing a particular millennial moment where the digital and physical worlds became inextricably blended."⁸ Despite Rooney's distrust of 'Millennial' being used as a label, her novels consist of Millennial characters in Millennial settings in such criteria that they could not be misplaced as existing in any other time frame.

What is a Millennial?

To understand the Millennial novel, we must first understand what a Millennial is. According to the Brookings Institution, Millennials are individuals born between the years 1981

⁷Reading, Writing, and Me. "hope."

⁸Reading, Writing, and Me. "hope."

through 1997.⁹ This report also notes that Millennials are much more likely to attend university, while much less likely to get married when compared to young adults in 1980.¹⁰ Furthermore, “The median age of marriage was lowest during the family-friendly 1950s—at age 20 for women and 22 for men. By 2015, these rose to ages 27 and 29, respectively.”¹¹ For Millennials, there is less of a hurry to begin a family, suggesting that priorities have changed significantly for this generation. The families that Millennials grew up in are the same families that they are in no rush to recreate. Due to this more individualized way of thinking, Millennials have often been described as “self-absorbed narcissists.”¹² They are described as being “self-indulgent” to such an extent that “businesses were fearful of hiring Millennials because they had their own priorities that seemed to trump work duties.”¹³ It is worth noting that passing judgment on the younger generation is a pattern that is not unique to Millennials. However, Millennials stoke a cultural anxiety that *is* unique to them. The Silent Generation was confounded by the Baby Boomers' need for rock n' roll music, but Millennials, with their advanced knowledge of technology gained through college educations, are much more likely to advance quickly in the workforce than generations before them. In response, it might appear that other generations sought to diminish what they perceived as the unearned confidence that Millennials seemed to have in abundance.

This confidence, however, is more on the surface than prior generations cared to understand. Author Steve Chapman attempts to defend Millennials:

The young people we accuse of being hopelessly self-satisfied are the same ones who have been told they had to score high on the SAT, get straight A's and cure cancer just to get into a decent college. Far from being hothouse flowers who wilt under pressure,

⁹ Frey, *Brookings Institution*, 6.

¹⁰ Frey, 12, 13.

¹¹ Frey, 11.

¹² Chapman, “Have We Raised a Generation of Narcissists?”

¹³ Haugen, *The Millennial Generation*, 22, 15-16.

they've coped with high expectations and intense competition... You would think the epidemic of narcissism would translate into selfish, destructive conduct. But on most counts, today's youngsters comport themselves more responsibly than Mom and Dad did at their age.¹⁴

It is important for this point of view to be recognized as negative perceptions of Millennials are profoundly popular when these might not be fair.

The writer and actor Lena Dunham has become the celebrity representation of the Millennial, for good or ill. Perhaps one of the most hotly contested celebrities in recent times, her influence on Millennial culture is inarguable. Dunham was the head writer and main character of HBO's *Girls* – a television series about four female friends in their twenties navigating school, relationships, body positivity, and reproductive health in New York City. Running from 2012 to 2017, this widely discussed show was often compared to its predecessor *Sex and the City*, but *Girls* could not be more different. Dunham acknowledged the things that viewers loved about *Sex and the City* – the shoes, the boyfriends, the parties, the perfect occupations (lawyer, author, art dealer, public relations manager) – and she removed those features from *Girls* in favor of a grittier depiction of four Millennial women. The show leaned into stereotypes that have been placed on Millennials – lazy, narcissistic, indecisive – which caused her Millennial audience to have mixed feelings about how they were being represented, and caused other generations to feel alienated and outside of the joke.

A decade later, the show is experiencing a resurgence as a *New York Times* article from 2023 asks “Why Are So Many People Rewatching ‘Girls?’”¹⁵ Questioned about the new viewers, Dunham responded, “My wish is that they’ll be able to maybe watch it away from some of the

¹⁴ Haugen, 24.

¹⁵ Holtermann, “Why Are So Many People Rewatching ‘Girls?’”

baggage it came with of the moment.’”¹⁶ The show, while popular with Millennials during the 2010s, has now found a new audience with Gen Z. The podcast called “HBO *Girls* Rewatch Podcast” was named one of the Best Podcasts of 2023 by *Vogue*, and has accumulated nearly fifty-thousand followers on *Instagram*.¹⁷ It is not new for beloved shows to be rewatched decades after their premiere. What makes *Girls* unique is that it was far from beloved, but it is still being watched. The podcast’s popularity suggests that creative work produced by Millennials, for Millennials, can transcend its particular historical moment and offer new audiences a variety of familiar or unfamiliar perspectives.

What is a Millennial novel?

No other generation has had their literature so overtly categorized by the features of its generation. There is no widely recognized category of the Baby Boomer novel or Generation X novel. Why, then, has ‘Millennial’ become such an active adjective? Ironically, the term ‘Millennial novel’ was first popularized by author and critic Tony Tulathimutte in a 2016 *New York Times* article, “Why There’s No ‘Millennial’ Novel,”¹⁸ which argues that there has never been and never will be a generational novel. He believes this to be especially true for a generation as diverse as the Millennials:

The generational novel, like the Great American Novel, is a comforting romantic myth, which wrongly assumes that commonality is more significant than individuality. You might get some vague notion of me if I told you I’m a first-generation Thai-American, middle-class, atheist, single, childless, postgraduate, freelancing, New Englander, straight, male millennial. But it’s probably more telling to say that I once took a first date home to watch zit-popping videos on YouTube.¹⁹

¹⁶ Holtermann, “Why?”

¹⁷ Ritthaler, @hbogirlsrewatch.

¹⁸ Tulathimutte, “Why There’s No ‘Millennial’ Novel.”

¹⁹ Tulathimutte, “Why There’s No ‘Millennial’ Novel.”

‘Millennial’ has become less of a category of a span of years, and more a description that encompasses a deadpan humor, an end-of-days mentality, and a struggle for commitment, among other easily recognized characteristics. The themes and topics that the Millennial novel covers are deep and challenging, while still recognizable to their readers, by association if not directly. While Rooney’s novels are set in Europe, many other novels are set in major American cities, typically New York, but also Chicago and Philadelphia. In them, the characters struggle to sustain the high cost of living in these cities, but they do not regard moving away as an option. The authors of Millennial novels are predominantly women, but oftentimes the male characters in the books are treated with more sensitivity than the female characters. Typically the Millennial authors apply a Dickensian ‘in medias res’ method to begin their books, where the reader is dropped into a situation with little to no explanation of the larger context and expected to catch up.

The reception that the Millennial novel has received has been inconsistent. For instance, while Rooney’s influence has been celebrated by prominent critics, her audience reviews are more mixed. This thesis seeks to identify the features of the Millennial novel in part to understand its vexed reception but also to understand how and why the celebrated Millennial writers it studies serve as “the voice of a generation” (to paraphrase Lena Dunham). I argue that there are three central concerns that drive the Millennial novel. These novels 1) often circulate around the complexities of romantic relationships and friendships for their characters; 2) depict these characters’ professional struggles, focusing in particular on their vexed relationship with the traditional workplace, which has now become a precarious and alienating space due to late capitalism; and 3) examine the changing contours of domestic life, depicting the ways in which

elements of contemporary life, including more progressive notions of sexuality and familial responsibilities, have changed traditional notions of the home.

The first chapter of this thesis centers on Sally Rooney and her first three novels to analyze how Millennial fiction depicts romantic relationships. Rooney's reign over the Millennial novel is both fascinating and difficult to explain. Her unapologetic union between contemporary economics and tragic romance has gained her two lucrative and critically acclaimed television shows on *Hulu*. By analyzing romantic relationships in *Conversations with Friends* (2017), *Normal People* (2019), and *Beautiful World Where Are You* (2021), I identify three factors shaping the Millennial romance: economic disparity, new technologies of communication, and a reworked marriage plot. First, in each of Rooney's romances, economic disparities characterization as well as plot because one partner is significantly more well-off than the other. In two out of her three novels thus far, the wealthier partner is the woman in the relationship. This disparity always causes problems for the couple. Second, these novels demonstrate how the invention of the smartphone in 1992 changed relationship dynamics. Now smartphones and apps like Facetime, WhatsApp, and Tinder make hundreds of miles feel like inches, but somehow this constant availability is actually hindering communication methods, leading to near-constant misunderstandings between characters. Third and finally, Rooney famously leaves her romances unresolved, reworking and even completely straying from the classic marriage plot. *Conversations with Friends* ends with a phone call that could result in a possible rekindling of what was a clearly concluded relationship; *Normal People* ends with one-half of the couple moving three thousand miles away; and *Beautiful World Where Are You* is the only one where the couples are still together at the conclusion of the novel, but by the end, you're not convinced if they *should* be. The Millennial relationships that Rooney depicts are messy, they usually involve

more people than just the couple themselves, and rarely do they work out. From this Millennial lens, we see in these ambiguous conclusions a jaded outlook on romantic commitment.

The second chapter of this thesis addresses the ways in which Millennial fiction depicts ‘the office,’ through a study of Halle Butler’s *The New Me* (2019) and Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018). Dunham depicted the work ethic, or lack thereof, of her characters with humor, but Butler and Moshfegh attempt to find the true root of the problem as to why the Millennials struggle so much with finding purpose in an occupation. The novels focus on female characters in temporary employment. *The New Me*’s protagonist Millie is passive and maintains an ironic distance from everything and everyone around her. She works in the superficial setting of a designer furniture showroom. Likewise temporarily employed in a job that focuses on outward appearance, the narrator in Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* takes a very specialized regimen of medication to get through *her* work day at an up-and-coming art gallery. In these novels, the employers are as incompetent or more incompetent than their temporary Millennial employees. At each novel’s conclusion, the protagonist must choose between stability and passion, suggesting that Millennials believe there cannot be a balance between the two. Both protagonists are very hard-working when motivated, and yet because they are underemployed and have mediocre superiors, a distinct level of distrust and disinterest in the labor steadily grows. Still, according to the Millennial novel, the relationship between Millennials and work is more repairable than their relationships with each other.

The third and final chapter of this thesis examines the Millennial novel’s depiction of ‘the home’ through readings of Kiley Reid’s *Such a Fun Age* (2019) and Raven Leilani’s *Luster* (2020). Both authors are Black women who write Black women as their protagonists. In concert with the other works studied in these thesis, these two novels depict romantic relationships and

characters who hold office jobs. In *Such A Fun Age* the female protagonist, Emira, is a babysitter, someone whose work is traditional domestic labor. *Luster*'s Edie begins her domestic work after she moves into the home of her lover who is in an open marriage. Like Emira, Edie also helps take care of a child who is not her own. During her stay, Edie begrudgingly begins to care for Akila, the married couple's adopted black daughter. In both cases, the domestic space becomes transactional and emotionally fraught. Each book depicts a public hate crime directed at their main characters, one in a grocery store and one just outside of the house, and the private home fails to provide these characters a safe haven from racism. *Such a Fun Age*'s Emira, a nanny, faces microaggressions under the constant surveillance of her white boss. And Edie must tolerate the awkward dynamics in the home that stem from the white married couple's blindness to the complexities of racism. Both novels end with Emira and Edie cutting all ties from the houses that they once worked in. Through the Millennial lens, the nuclear family with the white picket fence is completely gone – replaced with something deceiving and confusing, and the Black Millennial characters escape with feelings of relief.

Chapter 1: The Romance

Labeled the exemplary Millennial novelist, Sally Rooney's three novels *Conversations With Friends* (2017), *Normal People* (2018), and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) – all published within four years – provide a framework for understanding a key aspect of the Millennial novel: namely, the unsatisfying romance. The difficulties within the romantic relationships occur due to significant economic disparity between partners, a lack of productive communication due a reliance on technology, and general fears of commitment. Her Millennial characters are college-educated individuals who struggle with the traditional structures that have been set before them by previous generations, but they eventually come to embrace ambiguity in the spaces between romance, professional occupation, and family life.

Rooney's focus on romantic relationships has led to a critical debate regarding the value of her work as more than the average 'chick-lit' novel. Regarding Rooney's literary significance,, one *New York Times* article reads, "At times, she's been made to feel that her work is inconsequential. "Salinger for the Snapchat generation" has the benefit of alliteration, but none of her characters spend much if any time on social media. The *New Yorker* once called her dialogue "casual intellectual hooliganism," as if her characters were merely volleying knowledge like the college debaters of Rooney's earlier life: recklessly, for no other reason than because they can."²⁰ It is easy to dismiss Rooney's works as simple romances, but while the romances are integral to the novel's purpose, there is also a plethora of complex social and economic commentary taking place between and around the couples.

²⁰ Christensen, "'It Was Like I'd Never Done It Before.'"

Though the romances are the most well-known aspects of her novels, they are typically labeled as psychological fiction in part because of their lack of a classic, romantic, satisfying conclusion. Without this stereotypical happy ending, her novels are liberated from the confines of chick-lit and can move into the more critically revered genre of psychological fiction.

Psychological fiction is defined as works “of fiction in which the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of the characters are of equal or greater interest than is the external action of the narrative.”²¹ In Rooney’s works, however, there is little dramatic external action. The scenes are typically school dances, dinners, and car rides, making the action realistic and relatable, and sometimes slow.

By looking at how individuals in romantic relationships respond psychologically to external conditions like social class and technology, Rooney tells us about the pressures that have been placed on Millennials, and how Millennials, as opposed to crumbling under these pressures, turn away from them instead.

Conversations with Friends

Conversations with Friends (2017) was Sally Rooney’s debut novel which sparked interest in critics and readers alike, but it wouldn’t be until the publication of *Normal People* the following year that Rooney truly solidified her title as the first great Millennial author. Orlaith Darling, a fellow graduate of Trinity Dublin, supposed that “*Conversations with Friends*’s (2017) ‘distinctly modern voice’ is derived from its internet literacy and scintillating commentary on

²¹ Britannica, "psychological novel."

‘class and its millennial sister: privilege.’”²² This commentary on privilege is prominently shown through the romantic relationship between Frances, a university student by day and a spoken poetry performer by night, and Nick, a thirty-one-year-old married actor. There are many external factors that make this relationship difficult: Nick’s marriage to his wife Melissa, the eleven-year age gap between Nick and Frances, and the frequent physical distance between Nick and Frances due to his occupation. Their relationship is untraditional which suggests the rough contours of Millennial romantic commitment. Through Frances and Nick’s use of communicative technology, their economic disparity, and their rejection of the marriage plot, Rooney provides her Millennial characters with a jaded outlook on romance.

The central romance of *Conversations with Friends* is made possible because of both old and new technologies. Frances and Nick are initially brought together through the technology of photography, they then get to know each other through email exchanges, and they solidify their relationship through a phone call which concludes the novel. The methods of technology become more intimate as the pair themselves become more intimate. Technology plays a dual role in the relationship as it allows the couple to grow closer, but it also encourages miscommunication as the couple relies on email as opposed to speaking directly to each other.

There is never confusion regarding Nick’s relationship status as Frances meets Melissa, Nick’s wife, meaning that Frances knowingly engages in the affair. Melissa, who works as a columnist and photographer, discovers Frances, as she performs a spoken poetry act alongside her best friend, Bobbi. Through the article that Melissa decides to write on the two poets, Frances and Nick meet. The tension at the start of the novel hinges on whether or not Frances and Nick

²² Darling, ““Great Generational Decision,”” 538.

are going to go through with an affair, as their first digital interactions remain relatively innocent.

Frances's first digital interaction with Nick actually occurs without him even being present:

I had looked [Nick] up online since the first time we met him, partly because I didn't know any other actors in real life. He had mainly worked in theater, but he'd also done some TV and film. He had once, several years previously, been nominated for a major award, which he didn't win. I'd happened on a whole selection of shirtless photographs, most of which showed him looking younger, coming out of a swimming pool or showering on a TV show that had long ago been canceled. I sent Bobbi a link to one of these photographs with the message: trophy husband.²³

Without ever having a face-to-face conversation with Nick, Frances has already obtained information about Nick's professional career and his physical appearance due to her internet research.

Digital communication methods are meant to make life easier as they diminish the need for physical proximity, yet these methods also give light to new communicative challenges.

Frances attempts to send a simple 'thank you' email after Nick saves seats for her to attend his play, but the situation quickly becomes stress-inducing as Frances begins to grasp the depth of her feelings for Nick:

I left the umbrella by the courtyard door and opened up my laptop to look at Nick's e-mail address. I felt I should send him a short thank-you message for the tickets, but I kept getting distracted by items in the room, like a Toulouse-Lautrec poster I had hanging above the fireplace and a particular smudge on the patio window. I got up and walked around for a while to think about it. I cleaned the smudge with a damp cloth and then made a cup of tea. I considered calling Bobbi to talk about whether it would be normal to send an e-mail or not... I wrote a sample message, and then deleted the draft in case I might accidentally hit send. Then I wrote the same thing over again (29).

Frances believes there to be significant stakes at hand concerning how she formats this initial email; it can either begin a conversation or end one that never had a chance to begin. In Carol Dell'Amico's analysis of 'radical vulnerability' in *Conversations with Friends*, she thinks that "if

²³ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 12 (future citations parenthetical).

Frances were to have a diary, it would be a diary in the form of exchanges with other people, rather than relating her own experiences.”²⁴ Frances is extremely conscious of the ways she presents herself, and this anxiety doubles as she has to present herself through the Internet – a place where tone and nuance can be easily misinterpreted.

The uncertainty that pertains to online communication extends to the reader. When Nick responds to Frances’s ‘thank you’ email, the email is not formally written, but instead summarized through Frances’s possibly unreliable recollection. She recalls, “Nick replied to my e-mail the next afternoon in all lower case, thanking me for coming to the play and asking when Bobbi and I were next performing” (31). After Frances tells Nick to not worry if he cannot make her next show, he responds by writing, “oh well, it wouldn’t be very reciprocal then, would it?” (32). While the exact wording of Nick’s initial email is not provided, it is noted that he only writes in lowercase letters, which matches his strong and silent personality. Furthermore, not having the emails formally written out slightly alienates the reader and forces reliance on Frances’s perception of conversations. Even in the couple’s initial conversations, the possibility of miscommunication is strong. Also notable is the transactionality of the relationship, something that Rooney instills in nearly all of her couples. There is always a giver and a gainer, but this role can jump between the characters, which is now shifted to Nick and his turn to see Frances’s art.

The internet can facilitate romantic and sexual relationships, while simultaneously producing shame, as the opportunity for misunderstandings can be taken advantage of. After Frances and Nick’s initial round of messaging, she is reminded of a moment in her past when the internet was largely unmonitored. She reflects, “As a teenager I started using Internet messageboards and developed a friendship with a twenty-six-year-old American grad student...I

²⁴ Dell, “Radical Vulnerability,” 139.

sent him messages late at night confessing...I wish I had a boyfriend, I wrote” (34). In response to her messages, the grad student sends the teenage Frances a picture of his genitalia. Frances feels guilty and dirty, as though she has committed “a sick Internet crime” (34). This memory, which remained with Frances for the rest of her adolescence, is a prelude to the ways in which the internet facilitates a lack of boundaries and accountability.

Though widely known as a dangerous place today, the internet was not always viewed with such caution. A *Family and Law Journal* essay titled, “Protecting the Millennial Generation: Beyond the Scope of the Internet” explains in greater detail exactly what was waiting for Millennials who were introduced first to the internet.

Cyberbullying is the unfortunate reality for the millennial generation today...The millennials are growing up in a ‘Facebook/Instagram’ world in which children are able to, in essence, put filters on their lives and show people that they are having an amazing life, when in reality they are depressed...One of the aspects of life that millennials tend to be missing is the ability to form meaningful relationships because they live their lives through the internet (80, 81).

The essay identifies three variables that the internet has produced that affect Millennials: 1. The anonymity that the internet provides often leads to bullying; 2. The internet more often than not leads to dishonesty and harmful comparison; 3. The addictive quality of the internet prohibits Millennials from forming lasting and genuine relationships. Rooney looks at the last two variables in regard to Frances and Nick’s rocky relationship; a relationship that is solely possible because of the internet, but also how this relationship is weakened from the reliance on technology.

As Frances and Nick continue their digital correspondence the conversations become more intimate, but no less stress-free as Frances explains, “It was easy to write to Nick, but also competitive and thrilling, like a game of table tennis” (42). The conversations, which center

around holiday homes, college majors, and “dissertations on Caryl Churchill,” might initially seem far from thrilling, but the thrill comes from the inability to see Nick’s face as Frances questions him. The competitive aspect comes from having to interpret his reaction, when she only has his lowercase letters as evidence.

The affair begins after Nick kisses Frances at his wife’s birthday party, after which he sends her an apologetic email that reads, “hi frances, i’m sorry about what happened last night. it was fucking stupid of me and i feel awful. i don’t want to be that person and i don’t want you to think of me as that person either. i feel really bad about it. i should never have put you in that situation. i hope you’re feeling ok today (58-59). The reader is not given Frances’s exact response; instead she simply notes, “Eventually I wrote my reply, saying that it was my fault for kissing him, and that I was sorry” (59). The potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding is not only possible between Frances and Nick, but extended to the reader.

The Millennial Frances is not distressed by this lack of traditional intimacy; if anything, she is proud of the bond that they have created *by* and *through* technology. She thinks that “when our relationship was like a Word document that we were writing and editing together or a long private joke that nobody else could understand” (178). The internet has enabled the continuation of the affair.

As the romance began because of an email, the romance concludes through The novel concludes with one final phone call between Nick and Frances which leaves their relationship status unknown but with the possibility of a reconciliation. When Frances picks up Nick’s call he responds with, “I have no idea how this happened...Did I just place this call to you?” (298). Genuine or not, Nick is able to dismiss accountability for ‘accidentally’ calling Frances instead of his wife. The call ends with Frances saying, “Come and get me” (307). This is the Millennial

novel's version of a classic happy ending, simply mixed with uncertainty and ambiguity. Frances and Nick might end up together, but the reader is not allowed to bear witness to the moment of physical reunion, nor is the reader allowed to believe that this potential reunion is without painful cost for the couple or for other characters in the novel.

Through Frances and Nick, Rooney displays the dichotomy of how technology makes contemporary life easier, but also more easily elicits moral ambiguity. Something as simple as a congratulatory email becomes a sexually-charged, adulterous affair in just a matter of weeks. Digital technology has promised to simplify life but instead, it can make it more complicated and even painful.

The economic disparity between Frances and Nick works as a power imbalance, which is another force that is working against the couple. Nearly all of Rooney's characters belong to various stage of middle-class. The economic distance between Frances and Nick though is one of Rooney's larger discrepancies. As Orlaith Darling asserts, "For Rooney, the defining characteristic of the Millennial generation is precarity and expendability: [it's] interesting that this is the generation that came of age just as the financial crisis hit [. . .] it seems to me that the essential definitional fact about Millennials is that they are in an economically precarious position."²⁵ Rooney shows this precarity through Frances and contrasts her situation with Nick's older, and significantly more financially stable, situation.

Frances seeks a balance between shame and pride not only romantically, but also in her relationship with money and labor. While introducing themselves to Melissa, Bobbi says, "Well, I'm gay...And Frances is a communist," making Frances's economic beliefs not only her central

²⁵ Darling, "Great Generational Decision," 542.

identifying trait, but also the most interesting thing about her (6). Frances's relationship with money is examined throughout the novel. She admits:

I had no plans as to my future financial sustainability: I never wanted to earn money for doing anything... Though I knew that I would eventually have to enter full-time employment, I certainly never fantasized about a radiant future where I was paid to perform an economic role. Sometimes this felt like a failure to take an interest in my own life, which depressed me. On the other hand, I felt that my disinterest in wealth was ideologically healthy (22).

She is realistic about needing full-time employment in the future, but she chooses not to take steps to find out where this economic role might take place.

What began as a casually transactional relationship based in seeing each other perform becomes an economically transactional relationship after Frances expresses her financial concerns to Nick. After revealing that she receives financial assistance to cover college fees, Nick expresses surprise. Frances, not wanting him to get the wrong idea explains, "Well, we're not poor... I'm not saying that defensively. I just don't want you to get the impression that I grew up very poor or anything" (239). She then says, "My dad's been kind of unreliable about paying my allowance" (240). Frances seems to fall into the familiar state of a university student who is often low on cash but who also receives help from their parents. Nick then demonstrates his own financial situation when he gives Frances "four fifty-euro notes" simply because he can (240).

Rooney is often critiqued for her depictions of her character's financial situations. For instance, critic Becca Rothfield excoriates "the 'watered-down Marxism' of Rooney's 'affluent millennial' characters, reading the 'impotence and hypocrisy' of *Conversations with Friends* 'leftist communities' as an inherent personality trait rather than a reaction to external circumstance."²⁶ When Bobbi introduces Frances as a communist she is turning her political and

²⁶ Darling, "'Great Generational Decision,'" 542.

economic beliefs into a personality trait, however, Frances's feelings towards wealth and labor are not so simple. She balances a hatred for capitalism and personal wealth against an infatuation with the finer things in life, an inherently Millennial conflict between wanting to make an economic statement and wanting to be comfortable. Frances expresses her dichotomous feelings:

I explained that I wanted to destroy capitalism and that I considered masculinity personally oppressive...I became infatuated with the house he lived in: how immaculate everything was, and the coolness of the floorboards in the morning. They had an electric coffee grinder in the kitchen and Nick bought whole-bean coffee and then put small portions in the grinder before breakfast (73).

The fancy coffee maker that Frances loves is a product of capitalism, reflecting the ambivalence often ascribed to Millennials, a stereotype confirmed by Frances's ever-changing opinions.

The term 'marriage plot' might bring forth images of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, or any other novel that concludes in a wedding ceremony. Though all of Rooney's novels include romantic plotlines, none of them ends in a marriage. This recurring plot point may reflect the fact that Millennials have statistically turned away from the institution of marriage. According to the Brookings Institution, when compared to young adults in 1980, Millennials are much less likely to get married and start a family.²⁷ As marriage is no longer a guiding priority amongst Millennials today, without this kind of purpose, new ones must arise or there will be a vacant confusion. Frances and Nick are both searching for a larger purpose as Frances's only commitment is messaging Nick and Bobbi, and Nick is lost because of his unsatisfying marriage which has led him to messaging a woman over ten years his junior.

There is no exciting 'meet cute' between Nick and Frances that hints that they will be the romantic leads of the book. Only two lines appear when he is first introduced: "Her husband was in the kitchen doorway. He held up his hand to acknowledge us and the dog started yelping and

²⁷ Frey, 6.

whining and running around in circles” (5). As though Nick is not much to look at, Frances finds herself more interested in the dog that is running around. After he leaves the room Frances thinks about Nick’s appearance: “He had a big, handsome face and looked like he could comfortably pick Melissa up under one arm and fend off interlopers with the other” (5). Frances concedes that Nick is classically handsome, yet finds herself more fixated on his physical strength, but even that she does not let herself think about for more than one line.

A critical departure from the classic marriage plot is the fact that Nick is already married.

Only a little concerned by this fact, Frances says:

I mean, you’ve never had an affair before. I don’t want to wreck your marriage.
(Nick) Oh, well, the marriage has actually survived several affairs, I just haven’t been involved in any of them (68).

Now established that infidelity was present in the marriage before she was introduced, Frances feels “[Melissa] moving outside [her] frame of sympathy entirely” (68). The statistically significant drop in marriage rates within the Millennial generation raises the question of the importance of long-term, monogamous commitment in people of this age. The Pew Research Center found that 46% of Millennials are married, compared to 83% of the silent generation when they were 25 to 37 years of age.²⁸ Furthermore, “in 1968, the typical American woman first married at age 21... today, those figures have climbed to 28 for women.”²⁹ There are many different reasons for this societal shift – women are able to be more career-focused than before, attending college pushes familial plans back, people choose to not have families of their own for environmental reasons, and the list goes on. Millennials have been at the white-hot center of this cultural shift, the first generation to manifest its full impact.

²⁸ Bialik, “Millennial life.”

²⁹ Bialik, “Millennial life.”

Normal People

Normal People (2018) is a Millennial coming-of-age story that portrays Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron as they spend half a decade battling personal traumas while misinterpreting each other's feelings. This tragic love story was ranked number 25 on *The Guardian's* list of the best 100 books of the 21st century.³⁰ This ranking is because Rooney takes familiar genres such as bildungsroman, romance, and genre fiction, and then makes them applicable to today's reader through contemporary features such as awkward Skype calls, realistically flat conversations between teenagers, and stressful college parties.

To make the romance Millennial, Rooney provides her couples with an immediate challenge to overcome – for Frances and Nick it was their age difference, and for Connell and Marianne it is their drastically different social statuses. Connell Waldron is a tall, popular rugby player at a high school in Sligo, Ireland, while Marianne Sheridan is an ostracized loner who happens to be the “smartest person in school.”³¹ The pair are brought together because of their economic status; Connell's mother works as a cleaner in Marianne's home. Secrecy is embedded in their relationship from the start as “People knew that Marianne lives in the white mansion with the driveway and that Connell's mother is a cleaner, but no one knows of the special relationship between these facts” (2). The relationship between Connell and Marianne is present before the novel begins; the reader is not granted the ‘meet cute’ moment, in favor of being dropped into an already established situation, causing notions of alienation and the desire to know more.

Communicative technology in *Normal People* is first used to keep the relationship between Marianne and Connell a secret, but later becomes a tool to keep the pair close amidst

³⁰ “100 best books,” *The Guardian*.

³¹ Rooney, *Normal People*, 3.

physical distance. Unlike in *Conversations with Friends*, where technology helps initiate a relationship, it initially is not a uniting factor as Connell and Marianne are students who see each other in person nearly every day. Connell and Marianne have drastically different roles in their high school's social hierarchy, which encourages the pair to keep their relationship a secret. There is no explanation of how Connell and Marianne have each other's phone numbers; they simply begin texting, again notifying the reader that the pair, even if they were not close before, have some semblance of familiarity. The texts between Connell and Marianne are relatively simple and unrevealing. While Frances and Nick exchanged familial details and dreams over emails, because Connell and Marianne have grown up in the same small town, there is no need for digital revelations to be exchanged. Texting simply becomes a tool for Connell to avoid speaking in person with Marianne due to her status as a social pariah.

After a stressful exchange where Marianne's violent brother grabs her arm, she "takes her phone from a pocket and composes a text, repeatedly hitting the wrong key, deleting and retyping. Finally she sends it: On my way. Before she puts the phone back, she receives a reply: cool see you soon" (10). Through digital communication, Marianne finds reprieve from her abusive and neglectful home when she travels to Connell's less stately, but more welcoming house.

The secrecy of these meetings is imperative to Connell. He constantly worries that "if people found out what he has been doing with Marianne, in secret, while ignoring her every day in school, his life would be over" (28). Marianne has nothing to lose regarding her social status, but Connell deeply believes that he has everything to lose. Therefore, even as he "texted her the address" to his home, "before he lets her in he looks over her shoulder, to make sure that no one has seen her arrive" (18, 19). Marianne is going over to his home so that Connell can have sex

with her. In some romances, secrecy makes the relationship all the more thrilling, yet in *Normal People*, there is a distinctly sad tone as the insecurities of both Connell and Marianne bleed into each other and inspire poor decision-making. In an examination of what she coins ‘Youthful Quirk,’ Cecilia Donohue further examines the pair’s decision-making:

Connell and Marianne remain caught in a cyclical volley of distressingly quirky choices, where Connell’s multiple withdrawals from rekindling the relationship result in Marianne’s choices of increasingly toxic boyfriends, a demonstration of both her continued failure to develop valuable procedural knowledge as well as the persistent reinforcement of received knowledge from her nuclear family.³²

While their secrecy and the later rupture of the relationship lead Marianne down a path of ‘toxic boyfriends,’ Connell begins to isolate himself, leaving both characters in emotionally unstable positions.

When Connell and Marianne enter university, the role that communicative technology plays changes to match their evolving relationship. No longer confined to their small hometown high school, Marianne and Connell are free to interact with each other in public, but they still find comfort in the confines and separations of screens. In an example of how their power dynamic exists even in their digital relationship, Connell asks “Marianne if she would send him naked pictures of herself...He explained briefly the politics of naked pictures, not showing them to people, deleting them on request, and so on” (116). The conversation has a humorous tone after Marianne requests a photo from Connell in return, but this is not the first time in the novel where ‘naked pictures’ have been mentioned. Just weeks before at their school dance, Connell’s friend, Rob, showed him “naked photographs of Lisa,” Rob’s girlfriend (79). Eric, another one of Connell’s friends, “laughed and tapped parts of Lisa’s body on-screen with his fingers” (79). Though Connell does express his discomfort with Rob’s actions, he lets it go. As Frances

³² Donohue, “Youthful Quirk,” 55.

experienced on unmonitored message boards, there is always the possibility of a betrayal of trust regarding naked photographs and the internet.

As Connell and Marianne travel abroad for their various studies, they rely on Skype and email to remain connected, and it is during these emails and calls that the pair share some of their most intimate and honest moments. In one particularly revealing email, Connell writes regarding his concern for Marianne's relationship status:

By the way I looked your friend Lukas up on Facebook, he's what you would call 'Scandinavian looking.' Sadly Sweden did not qualify for the World Cup this time so if you end up with a Swedish boyfriend I'll have to think of another way to bond with him. Not that I'm saying this guy Lukas is going to be your boyfriend or would want to talk to me about football if he was, although it's something I am putting out as a possibility. I know you like the tall handsome guys as you say, so why not Lukas, who looks tall and is also handsome (Helen has seen his photo and agrees). But whatever, I'm not pushing the boyfriend thing, I just hope you have confirmed he's not a psychopath. You don't always have a good radar on that (192).

Connell, never this talkative in person, is able to write out his emotions in a vulnerable manner, even if he does have to mention football and his girlfriend in an attempt to distract from what he is really asking, which is whether or not Marianne is in a relationship.

The pair's technological relationship becomes a daily habit. The Skype calls have even changed Connell's perception of Marianne:

He talks to Marianne almost every night on Skype now, sometimes after dinner or sometimes late when she comes home from a night out...When they speak the video stream is high quality but frequently fails to match the audio, which gives him a sense of Marianne as a moving image, a thing to be looked at (222).

Marianne is no longer only traveling from home to school and back again. She has nights out while Connell now sits and waits for her return after which he greets her virtually. Connell had once acknowledged that "some people thought [Marianne] was the ugliest girl in school" (25).

He may not have agreed with this sentiment, but he surely did not go around disagreeing with it either. Yet now, through a screen, Marianne has become something that should be looked at, something fleeting that needs to be valued. In *Conversations with Friends*, technology helps build a relationship. In *Normal People* the relationship has already been built, therefore the technology sustains the relationship across great physical distance and for years.

From the first pages of the novel, Rooney makes a clear class distinction between Marianne and Connell. The opening scene depicts Connell picking up his mother from Marianne's house, where she works as a cleaner, because Connell and his mother share a car (1). While Marianne has the economic advantage over Connell, he has the social advantage. María Barros-Del Río reads *Normal People* through a recessionary Irish lens, and she notes:

The novel tells the story of two students whose social positioning shifts over time as is customary in novels of formation. Space remains an essential feature in the novel, with the two characters' progressive physical distance from their place of origin into the wider world, and their negotiations to gradually achieve social inclusion. But mobility in the physical sense is intertwined with social mobility, and so the novel adapts to the Post Celtic Tiger context dominated by precarity and engages with political agency and subjectivity.³³

As mentioned in the digital communication section, physical distance affects Connell and Marianne's individual social rankings.

While in high school, Connell's lower middle-class status does not hinder him from being a popular, well-liked, athletic student, while Marianne's established familial wealth only further alienates her from her peers. Connell explains, "People know that Marianne lives in the white mansion with the driveway and that Connell's mother is a cleaner" (2). Though it is a well-kept secret that Connell's mother works in Marianne's home, it is public knowledge of the economic

³³ Barros-Del Río, "Formation in Recessionary Ireland," 179.

disparity between Connell and Marianne. Connell goes further, explaining that Marianne “is considered an object of disgust” (3). In their small high school, in the town of Sligo, Marianne’s economic status does nothing to help her social status, while Connell’s lack of economic status does not hinder him from having a prominent social position. Through a Millennial perspective, for secondary school students, social status outweighs economic ranking.

While Marianne and Connell’s peers might not think of the economic disparity between the pair, Connell’s mother, Lorraine, sees it as a potentially disruptive factor. When being unforthcoming about his relationship status, Lorraine questions:

Is it because of her mother?... You think she’d frown on you?
 What?
 Because she might, you know.
 Frown on me? said Connell. That’s insane what have I ever done?
 I think she might consider us a little bit beneath her station.
 He stared at his mother across the kitchen while she put a box of own-brand cornflakes into the press. The idea that Marianne’s family considered themselves superior to himself and Lorraine, too good to be associated with them, had never occurred to him before. He found, to his surprise, that the idea made him furious (53).

Lorraine’s reaction may be pessimistic, but Connell’s belief that Marianne’s economic status would have no influence on their relationship is naive.

When both Connell and Marianne attend Trinity College Dublin, Connell becomes educated in the power of Marianne’s economic status. There is a mirrored conversation again between Connell and Lorraine, but now Connell is less naive about economic influence within relationships:

By July even Lorraine had heard that Marianne was seeing someone new. Connell knew that people in town were talking about it, because Jamie had this nationally infamous father...
 Marianne Sheridan wouldn’t go out with someone like me, [Connell] said.
 What does that mean, someone like you?

I think her new boyfriend is a bit more in line with her social class (130-131).

Connell combines economic and social class, determining their influence to be of an equal measure. In “The Continuum of Irish Female Sexuality in Sally Rooney’s *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*: A Contradicted Ireland,” Sofía Alférez Mendía finds that Marianne’s “relationship with Connell can be considered damaging and humiliating. Whilst Marianne has a privileged social class, it is Connell who enjoys a privileged social status, and this is what drives him to ask Marianne to keep their relationship private.”³⁴

After four years of breakups and reunions, toxic relationships, and holidays, the novel seems as though it is going to conclude with Connell and Marianne happily spending their lives together. Connell, who had struggled to show Marianne physical intimacy in public “took Marianne into his arms and kissed her” at a New Year’s Eve party (268).

When they drew apart Connell looked her in the eyes and said: I love you. She was laughing then, and her face was red. She was in his power, he had chosen to redeem her, she was redeemed. It was so unlike him to behave that way in public that he must have been doing it on purpose, to please her...She knows he loves her, she doesn’t wonder about that anymore (269).

The novel could conclude here. Rooney would have taken her readers on the journey of a romance that struggled through miscommunication, but eventually love succeeded.

But Rooney refuses to conclude *Normal People* with a neat romantic relationship, and that is what makes this work a Millennial novel instead of romantic fiction. At the novel’s end, Connell is accepted into a creative writing program in New York City, which leads Marianne to respond to the news first with insecurity, then embarrassment, and finally acceptance. Marianne

³⁴ Alférez Mendía, “Continuum,” 157.

is hurt that Connell did not tell her that he applied for the program, but that his classmate and fellow creative writer, Sadie Darcy-O'Shea, was aware of his application. Marianne asks, "Are you in love with her?" (270). Though just a page prior, Marianne is fully convinced of Connell's love for herself, her confidence has crumpled beneath the revelation of his acceptance letter. Marianne tells Connell that he should go to the program while she remains in Dublin. Connell weakly says that he would miss Marianne too much, but it is evident that he wants to attend the program. Marianne considers the situation: "He probably won't come back, she thinks. Or he will, differently. What they have now they can never have back again... You should go, she says. I'll always be here. You know that" (273). After nearly three hundred pages of Connell and Marianne's love story, they decide to part ways after finally admitting their love for each other. With communicative technology and advanced transportation, there is no reason why their relationship has to end because of the physical distance, and yet the conclusion feels resolute. Marianne and Connell have changed each other's lives, for better or for worse, and it is now time for them to go their separate ways. Rooney effectively demolishes any sort of satisfying conclusion in the final three pages of the novel, thereby further establishing the jaded Millennial outlook on romantic commitment.

Beautiful World, Where Are You

Sally Rooney's third novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021), examines the relationship between Alice, a twenty-nine-year-old successful author, and Felix, a warehouse worker whom she meets through *Tinder*. The novel is told through an omniscient third person narrator who alternates focus between Alice and her friend Eileen. Sarah Berry, who has

analyzed religion in *Beautiful, World Where Are You*, argues: “I take the structure of *Beautiful World, Where Are You* to be an index of the bifurcation of human experience in the twenty-first century. Rooney's characters live in a world in which the physical and the verbal have been pulled apart.”³⁵ Every other chapter of the novel is an email message between Alice and her best friend Eileen. These emails consist of history lessons, economic theology, and memories, but most notably, Alice and Eileen trade notes about their romantic lives, of which the other typically critiques. While there is another romance in this novel aside from Alice and Felix, that between Eileen and her childhood friend Simon, the relationship between Alice and Felix more overtly embodies the dynamic of the Millennial romance through the couple's use of communicative technology, the economic disparity between the pair, and especially their relationship's conclusion.

Alice and Felix meet through the dating app *Tinder*, and the first pages of the novel depict their initial in-person encounter. The stunted, awkward tone of this first date remains consistent throughout the rest of their relationship. In this novel, digital technology is not only used to foster communication but also as a way to distract from possible conversation. Felix arrives at their first date eight minutes late and, when he finally arrives, he takes an extra moment to take his phone out and check for notifications.”³⁶ This is something that Felix does throughout the entire novel, almost like a nervous tic. Later, while perusing the grocery store aisles, Felix “replaced a ready meal on a shelf and took out his phone. There were no new notifications. Inexpressively he put the device back in his pocket” (43). The significance of this scene comes from Felix's expressionless face; he is neither relieved nor disappointed by the lack of phone

³⁵ Berry, “Two Narrators,” 374-375.

³⁶ Rooney, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, 3.

calls or emails. It was simply an instinct for him to tap his screen as he was searching for his dinner. Felix is so attached to his phone that later in novel, when he observes Alice on a panel discussing her novel, he

wandered around with his headphones in, checking his messages, his social media timelines...Felix returned to the top of his timeline, refreshed it, waited for new posts to load, and then did the same thing again, several times. He didn't even seem to read the new posts before pulling down to refresh again (87).

Unlike the other uses of digital communication that Rooney has displayed in her novels, technology seems to be working against Alice and Felix, as Felix's near compulsive phone checking hinders his ability to be in the moment and to connect with Alice.

Repeatedly, the internet seems to offer the couple tools for transparency and connection, a way to foster intimacy between them, but fails to deliver on that promise. Early in the relationship, Felix runs into Alice which results in an invitation to a party that he's throwing, which requires him to send Alice *Google Maps* directions to his home (45). During the party, one of Felix's friends finds Alice's *Wikipedia* page which then establishes her as "famous" (48). The *Wikipedia* page reveals information about Alice that could have been provided through an in-person conversation, but instead has been relegated to assumptions made through the internet. This situation mirrors when Frances found information about Nick online, there is a lack of privacy and a potential for misinformation. Further, when Alice invites Felix to travel to Rome with her, Felix takes to posting photos in a *WhatsApp* groupchat, to which his friends respond with reasonable confusion:

Felix: Roma baby

Felix: LMAO

Felix: Here with some girl I met on tinder, ill tell you when im back

Mick: How are you in rome with someone you met on tinder?

Mick: This needs way more explanation hahaha

Dave: Wait what!! did a wealthy old lady pick you up on the internet? (85).

The blase manner in which Felix talks about Alice makes evident that, if he does have feelings for her, he is keeping them very contained, or he simply has no romantic interest in her and has simply accepted her offer of a free trip to Italy. Their relationship is public, for his friends, and mediated by texts, rather than strictly a personal matter shared between him and Alice.

Like digital technology, economic conditions thwart the intimacy between characters in *Beautiful World Where Are You*. While Connell and Marianne's financial situations were attributable to their families, Felix and Alice's financial situations are relatively self-made. It is revealed that when she was "twenty-four, Alice signed an American book deal for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars" (33). Though she finds herself in a place of economic prosperity, the pressure proves to be too much for Alice and results in her mental breakdown (51). In contrast, Felix works in a shipping warehouse and is not affluent. When Alice asks him whether he enjoys the work or not, Felix replies, "I fucking hate the place. But they wouldn't be paying me to do something I liked, would they? That's the thing about work, if it was any good you'd do it for free" (5). Reflecting on Felix's economic condition, Berry poses that "Rooney applies the same dispassionate but detailed prose style to the descriptions of Felix at work in a shipping warehouse. The narrator records the injuries and indignities of this kind of labor in precise detail, down to the way the stillage trolley handles and the number of minutes he spends waiting in line to be searched at the end of his shift."³⁷ Felix has no passion or interest in his work, an inherently Millennial trait that will be further examined in Chapter Two, but there is little he can do about it living in his small town where there is little opportunity.

³⁷ Berry, 379.

Despite these challenges, Alice and Felix are different from Connell and Marianne, and from Frances and Nick, because at the conclusion of *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, they are still together. Yet out of these three couples, Alice and Felix seem to like each other the least. For instance, in certain scenes it seems as though there is little to no physical attraction between the pair. When showing off a photo of the classically attractive Eileen and Simon, Alice explains,

They're nice for me to look at, you mean, said Alice. But one does feel like a bit of a dog in comparison.

Felix smiles. Ah, you're not a dog, he said. You have your good points.

Like my charming personality.

After a pause, he asked: Would you call it charming? (81)

While this can appear to be witty, flirtatious banter, it falls flat, leaning closer to indifference. Yet almost immediately and seemingly out of nowhere, Alice seems to have fallen in love with Felix.

When he accuses her of doing just this, Alice replies,

I wouldn't tell you if I were.

He laughed. Good for you, he said. And don't get the wrong idea, you're welcome to be in love with me if you want. I would have to put you down as a bit of a lunatic, but I kind of think that about you anyway (84).

Felix, unlike Connell, and even unlike Nick, seems to have an abundance of confidence despite his average career and described appearance, suggesting that for Millennials, the outward signs of professional achievement are not necessary for self-confidence.

You're not the easiest person to get along with...but you know that yourself.

Felix, is it too much to ask that you might stop critisizng my personality?...I don't want you to flatter me. You really don't have to say anything about me at all. I just don't find the negative feedback useful (301).

Further, the relationship between Alice and Felix is neither overtly romantic nor exactly supportive.

‘Alice Kelleher: my boyfriend has never read my books’ – and afterwards Felix saw a popular tweet saying something like, ‘this is tragic...she deserves better’. He showed me the tweet on the screen of his phone one evening without saying anything, and when I asked him what he thought about it, he just shrugged (327).

Sally Rooney has taken romantic fiction, surrounded it with technological communication devices, restructured economic disparity in most of her couples, and completely removed the happily ever after. By doing this she has created frustrating, and often pitiful, characters who appear to make their lives more difficult than they need to be. As a result, readers can become enamored with compassion for these characters who remind them of the innermost parts of themselves.

Chapter 2: The Workplace

Two recent Millennial novels by American women, Halle Butler's *The New Me* (2019) and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) follow female protagonists in temporary employment. *The New Me*'s protagonist, thirty-year-old Millie is passive and maintains an ironic distance from everything and everyone around her. She is a characterized representation of her generation as even her name, Millie, purposefully sounds 'Millennial.' Millie works in the superficial setting of a designer furniture showroom as a temp receptionist. Likewise temporarily employed in a job that values external appearance, the twenty-four-year-old narrator in Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* takes an unethically obtained regimen of medication to make it through her work day at an up-and-coming art gallery. In these novels, the employers are as or more incompetent than their temporary Millennial employees. While Rooney's romances end in ambiguity, these novels set in the workplace conclude with an unsettling, almost eerie, finality where the characters' original personality is lost so that something new and other is reborn.

The Millennial generation has been described as "the job-hopping generation."³⁸ As the costs of living have continuously risen, employees have to seek out the best salaries they can, which may mean changing employment multiple times in one year. Due in part to precarious economic conditions fostered by technological advancements and political unrest, Millennials tend to see themselves as individuals rather than as part of a collective workforce. In past generations, as a recent poll by *Fortune* magazine found, "more than 40% of America's baby boomers stayed with their employer for more than 20 years."³⁹ In the past, employers used to

³⁸ Adkins, "Millennials: The Job-Hopping Generation."

³⁹ The Associated Press, "Here's Why Your Parents Stayed."

award bonuses more regularly to encourage not only outstanding performances but also professional loyalty, employees were offered stock in the company to encourage harder work and “buy-in” to the collective business, and some employees even had pensions which encouraged them to continue with the company until retirement. As pension plans and bonus benefits slowly disappeared, portable 401(k)s, an alternative means to fund retirement that can move with the individual worker from job to job, also undermined any commitment to the same job for multiple years. Furthermore, it is simply easier to find a new job through digital platforms like *LinkedIn* and *Glassdoor*, where employers can easily recruit individuals seeking a new job.

These practical changes in how hiring and retention work have contributed to a mistrust among Millennials in traditional patterns of employment. Joe Coughlin, the director of Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s AgeLab, explains that “Millennials think [about the job market] instinctively...They’ve seen their parents laid off by these large corporations, so there is less trust.”⁴⁰ The oldest Millennials would have been in their mid-20s during the financial recession in the late 2000s; as a result, when they first began seeking adult employment, they were faced with a struggling job market and few opportunities for meaningful employment. While Rooney catalogs these changes for her Irish characters, who are often self-consciously aware of their role as employees in a global marketplace, Millennial novelists like Halle Butler and Ottessa Moshfegh have turned their attention to the contemporary workplace in America, attending to how these economic and employment conditions have changing understandings of labor and work for their female protagonists, as well as calling into question the new shape of the myth of the American Dream.

⁴⁰ The Associated Press, “Here’s Why Your Parents Stayed.”

In their Millennial novels, Butler and Moshfegh are concerned with how the temporality of their characters' occupations negatively affects their psyches and limits their abilities to form healthy relationships with those around them as well as with themselves. *The New Me*'s Millie is employed by a temp agency, whose purpose is to find people seeking work who are willing to be employed when more help is needed, but only for a short period. This time constraint prohibits Millie from making any meaningful connections with her coworkers or supervisors and diminishes her interest levels in the work. The protagonist of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, who is unnamed and will be called Narrator for the purposes of this thesis, does not want to work, nor does she immediately have to as she lives off a large inheritance from her deceased parents. Though she has no financial need, Narrator obtains a job because she believes that the traditional structure of labor could be the answer to her striving for normalcy and purpose. There is no passion in either woman for their respective occupations, yet they each do the labor, in part for financial stability but even more because a job can inspire what these Millennial novel characters are seeking: purpose.

The New Me

There is an underscored promise in the working world that if you work hard enough, and long enough, you will be rewarded. Halle Butler takes this promise and undermines it through her main character, a college-educated, thirty-year-old woman who works in entry-level positions for weeks at a time. Employed through a temp agency in Chicago, Millie is constantly meeting new people through her frequent job changes, but this does not build her an enriched social life, instead, Millie is alienated from everything around her because of the mental toll the temporary work takes on her. Within the first lines of the novel Butler establishes a judgemental but

conceding tone that remains prevalent throughout the novel as Millie's fatigue, mean-spirited humor, and narcissistic tendencies amplify. The novel begins:

It's winter in Chicago.

In the windowless back offices of a designer furniture showroom, women stand in a circle, stuffed into ill-fitting black jeans, gray jeans, olive jeans, the ass cloth sagging one inch, two, below where the cheeks meet. They don't notice this on themselves, but they notice it on each other.⁴¹

Chicago, known for its cold and grey winters, matches Millie's own dreary countenance and her mannerisms regarding work. Millie sits and watches her coworkers converse, first noting their physical appearance before she brutally analyzes their conversation. Millie assumes that everyone around her is just as judgmental as herself, attempting to normalize her own insecurity and constant self-awareness.

Millie's inherent Millennial trait of insecurity causes her to believe that she is unworthy of full-time, benefitted work. While contractually permanent, steady work would be a comfort to most, but it fills Millie with a sense of dread and fear. She thinks, "I wonder how I would have to behave, how many changes I would have to make, to tip myself over the edge into this endless abyss of perm" (2-3). Millie's thoughts about permanent work are twofold. First, she is unsure if she is able to change her personality in the ways that a full-time job would demand, and second, Millie believes that life ends when permanent work is obtained. In terms of personality changes, permanent work demands being more outgoing and chatty in the breakroom, decorating a desk or an office, and remembering the names of co-workers. Permanent work calls for ambition and moving up ladders at one company, for an unlimited amount of time. The monotony that would inevitably come from working in the same office for years at a time fills Millie with unease so

⁴¹ Butler, *The New Me*, 1.

that stability is seen as a never-ending abyss. Millie's relationship with labor is not inhibited by her work ethic but because of her insecurity regarding her self-worth.

Working as a temp for nearly a decade has negatively impacted Millie's ability to advocate for herself in professional situations. After a week of working in the showroom, Millie is called the wrong name by her supervisor, Karen. Following the misspoken "Maddie," Millie creates a lengthy monologue in her head about how she was named after her great-great-grandmother, "a suffragette," and fantasizes about crying insensibly in front of Karen (7). None of her thoughts are spoken aloud, no correction is made, and Millie smiles at Karen as she walks slowly past the "tasteless living spaces" until she reaches her station (7). Millie makes a conscious decision not to correct Karen about her error not only because of the temporality of her position in the office, but also because Millie feels as though she can't. Millie is genuinely hurt by the offense, as evidenced by her noting that her mother explicitly did not name her "Madison after the mermaid from fucking *Splash*," and thinks of Karen as a "thankless cunt" (7). Millie is incensed by Karen's carelessness but consciously chooses to not remedy the situation through simple conversation, another destructive Millennial quality found in Rooney's novels. Millie's impermanent position leads her to regard herself as a temporary employee who does not deserve the same respect that others are given. She devolves into someone who is unable to make an innocent correction of a handful of incorrectly spoken letters.

Millie's difficulty with communication is not reserved for her superiors and also suspends to her coworkers, further establishing Millennial's tendencies to prefer technological communication as opposed to an in-person dialogue. Millie is sitting in a communal room specially designed for employees to take a break and communicate with their peers. Though this is meant to be a safe, neutral place, Millie is repulsed by it. She thinks:

No one is talking to me or looking at me, as usual. I say almost nothing, almost all the time. Obviously, I recognize, in a grander sense, that I have a tendency to alienate myself and blow things out of proportion, and that these women are basically guiltless from a certain perspective. I fully recognize the concept of perspective (7-8).

Millie is dramatic and narcissistic as she admits, but she is also aware of these traits, showing the dichotomy of her character. Millie says that she “recognizes the concept of perspective” but even in her phrasing, she is defensive. She “recognizes” that she alienates herself, but this recognition does not inspire action.

Millie struggles with self-degradation, due to her sustained temporality, and then overcompensates by indulging her self-importance through the thought that everyone around her is constantly thinking about her. Millie’s almost paranoid persona is displayed when one of her co-workers enters the breakroom checking her phone. Millie assumes that the woman must be “pretending [Millie’s] not here,” and that the woman “is wrapped up in some distraction so utterly meaningless that it should, if she reflected on it, shake her to her core” (8). Millie has no idea what the woman is looking at on her phone, and yet, through the projection of her own insecurity regarding the wasting of time, Millie uses a random coworker to justify the negative thoughts she feels about herself.

Millie’s insecurity is apparent not only when she is being called the wrong name, but also when she is being complimented, meaning that she has lost her ability to regulate her emotions. What should be a simple and kind interaction after a co-worker tells Millie that “she likes [her] shirt,” becomes completely derailed because of Millie’s nonexistent self-esteem. Millie responds to the compliment, not outwardly, but in her thoughts, “a pure bluff, it’s a pit-stained silk J. Crew affair, too tight and five years old – and asks me if I need any help...so I say, ‘No, not really, I’m good’...Her name is, I think, Lindsey. Possibly Rachel” (9). Millie thinks so lowly of herself that

an innocent compliment from a coworker becomes an impossibility beyond her belief. Not only does Millie refuse to accept the compliment, but she also refuses the help and comradery that is offered. Earlier that day, Millie had become irate when Karen forgot her name, and yet when a seemingly kind coworker offers help and a compliment, Millie cannot remember her name and does not go out of her way to learn her coworker's either. Millie does not like the way that she is treated at the office, and yet she does nothing to change her situation, nor does she treat her coworkers in the way that she desires to be treated. This is a representation of stagnancy and immobility in the workforce, a situation especially resonant for Millennials.

Millie's lack of fear around the idea of being fired highlights how little she cares about the work that she is doing. The main task of Millie's job as a junior receptionist is to answer the phones. As the phones ring, Millie is "drinking burnt coffee and googling foods that reduce stress" (9). In her free time, of which there is an abundance, Millie does not see if there are any other tasks she should complete; instead, she spends the majority of her workday on hidden *Google* tabs searching for recipes that she does not cook when she gets home. When the phone does eventually ring, just after the first exchange of pleasantries, Millie knows that the man on the line is "going to yell at [her]" (9). This call is a relatively simple misunderstanding – the man on the line, Tom Jordan, is one of the showroom's top designers, and he has mistaken the showroom's New York number for their Chicago number. The conversation bristles with frustration on both ends, but Millie turns Jordan's impatience into an attack on her own character. To defend herself from this ostensible attack, Millie finds Tom Jordan's photo online and creates an entirely fictional narrative about his life, which takes up nearly an entire page. Millie assumes that Jordan has a much younger girlfriend, that his father's dying words to him were "I wish you had been less of a dick," and that he has "no one to confide in but nothing to confide," just a few

of the many character assumptions she makes about the man” (10-11). Millie does not attempt to excel in her position, she barely cares to be average. Yet while Millie brings an imaginative energy to these fictional descriptions, she loses this creativity when it comes to problem-solving for her actual job. Even after she is unable to find a solution, she uses sarcasm to block out her failure: “I wasn’t able to help Tom Jordan, *the* Tom Jordan, and now I’m going to get fired, oh well, so it goes” (11). Again, Millie is protecting herself from the disappointment she pretends she would not feel if she were fired.

Butler chose the name Karen for Millie’s boss because it inspires an immediate distrust from the reader. *The Guardian* defines ‘a Karen’ as “a middle-aged white woman with an asymmetrical bob asking to speak to the manager, who happens to be as entitled as she is ignorant.”⁴² What began as an internet meme born of and predominantly used on Black Twitter has created connotations that are known by Butler’s readers. The first mention of Karen’s name, even prior to the slight she makes against Millie, establishes that her character is not to be trusted and will most likely be portrayed in a villainous light, regardless of her intentions. With chapters from Karen’s point of view, her intentions toward Millie can be seen as villainous as she spends the majority of the novel conspiring about how she can fire Millie and still get back the deposit they paid to the temp agency to hire her.

Part of Karen’s role in the novel is to display that there is always someone higher on the totem pole in the workforce. Though Karen is Millie’s boss, Karen is also constantly looking to her own boss for approval. By providing Karen as the force opposing Millie’s potential, the narrative makes Millie look even worse at her job than what we see from her own perspective. That said, Karen is not made out to be a complete villain. Karen has legitimate complaints about

⁴² Hunt, “Karen.”

Millie arriving late to work and leaving too early. Though the Karen chapters provide context about Millie's performance they also fill the reader with a sense of pity, as Karen's biggest complaint is not about Millie's poor work performance, but because of her "image" and her outward energy (15).

Millie breezed in five minutes later, ten minutes late, and gave Karen a weird smile and wave, and when Millie said 'hello' it sounded like a piece of phlegm got caught in her throat, and the second half of her greeting was silent, just 'he-' and mouthed 'llo.' Karen smiled and nodded, then looked down at her notebook. Wheels turning (19).

When Millie greets Karen in the morning, it is the first words that she speaks aloud that day, making it understandable when they come out hoarse or unheard. Karen is actively trying to figure out a way where she can fire Millie, and still get back the deposit that she paid for the temp agency's help in hiring Millie.

Millie not only lacks an interest in her job, but she fears doing well at it, more than she fears being bad at it, as she is afraid of the changes that would occur if she bettered herself. Millie has her own theory as to why temp work is so appealing to her, "I think I'm drawn to temp work for the slight atmospheric changes. The new offices and coworkers provide a nice illusion of variety. Like how people switch out their cats' wet food from Chicken and Liver to Sea Bass, but in the end, it's all just flavored anus" (22). The variety might be why Millie thinks she likes temporary work, but it is not the complete reason. Millie says that she likes the variety of new faces and new walls that accompany temp work, yet makes no effort to decorate her desk or any effort to get to know her coworkers and have her coworkers know her. To Millie, all work tastes bad and there is no way around it. It is not only the distaste toward work that keeps Millie from excelling at her work, there is also a large sense of fear that holds her back. After asking Karen if

there was any other work for her to do, Millie feels assertive and confident, and that today will be a new day.

When Millie truly believes that she is about to be fired from her position, she is filled with righteous adrenaline, as opposed to the more natural reaction of fear. When Karen approaches Millie to give her some extra work, Millie thinks, “She’s going to fire me. I’m not so much bracing for it as I am having a kind of paroxysm, adrenaline filling me up, and a loud, deep voice shouting yeah well fuck you too in my ears” (41). Millie has complex feelings about what it would be like to be fired by Karen. On one hand, she thinks of it as inevitable, because of her temporary position, and lashes out in her thoughts, but on the other hand, the idea of being fired does cause Millie distress. There is a deep misunderstanding that occurs with this mention of a new task. When Karen gives Mille an extra task, this leads Millie to think that work is going well, when in actuality, Karen “was hoping that giving her an extra task would keep Millie out of her hair while she arranged for her replacement” (43). Instead of a conversation taking place between Mille and Karen where Karen explains that she has been unimpressed with Millie’s works and provides tips on how to improve, everything is done silently because communication in the modern-day workplace does not breed conversation.

With little to no evidence, Millie changes her life because of this misunderstanding. Millie’s ever-changing opinions about her own self-worth completely blind her to what is really going on around her. “Work again, another fucking waking nightmare,” is how Millie describes going back into the office after a weekend (48). Millie could not make it more clear that she is not only unhappy with her life, but also that much of this unhappiness stems from her occupation at Lisa Hopper, the name of the furniture showroom. Since Karen has been in contact with the temp agency about firing Millie, Millie’s representative sends her a vague email asking about

how things are going in the showroom. Millie does not take this email as a sign that her supervisors are unhappy with her work; instead, Millie takes this email as a sign that she is being promoted to working permanently. She spends the next twenty minutes in the bathroom crying and hyperventilating about how a full-time position could change her life and make her “calm, cool, self-assured, self-reliant, independent” and a plethora of other characteristics that will magically appear because of the permanency of her position (77). It is not the work that inspires Millie, but what could come as a result of the work. Millie attributes much of her self-worth to how temporary her job is – because she is only a temporary worker, she never has to try to be more than mediocre, but the thought of permanency requires a different level of commitment. After daydreaming in the bathroom about all the good that can come from a full-time position, Millie thinks “I got the job!” (79).

During a phone conversation with her mother, Millie gets closer to the real reasoning behind her aversion to permanency. She says, “‘It’s just, you know. I really hate the idea of this job. Everyone there is so ridiculous, and the work is completely meaningless, and thinking about taking the job is depressing. I mean, thinking about where it might lead is depressing’” (84). For Millie, the monotony of a permanent job is so unbearable that she would rather jump from job to job, never making any lasting connections. Millie thinks that the work she is doing is meaningless, but she doesn’t try to change anything about her work. To her credit, Millie does ask if there are any extra tasks she can complete, to which Karen responds by giving her a stack of documents and a paper shredder. Millie takes the initiative to ask for more work, but then she doesn’t complete it, and “the stack of papers sat almost glowing on the edge of Millie’s desk,” forgotten (97). Due to Millie’s delusion about her promotion, she completely stops doing any of her office work, noting, “I spend the rest of my week this way, planning for my future” (96). By

planning for a future that will never come to fruition, Millie completely neglects the present, which results in her termination.

The dramatic irony that this novel relies on is less punchy than it is depressing. The reader sees Millie half-heartedly trying to get her life together, and yet it goes too far to say that she is easy to root for, or that she is a victim of American capitalism. The novel's tone remains consistently eerie with occasional humor to alleviate the tension – the tension coming from the fact that the reader knows Millie will be fired. Millie was bad at her job and she was terminated because of her poor work ethic. What makes this book notable when discussing the Millennial mindset is that, like many Millennials, Millie was never set up for success. Karen reflects, “I have felt slightly uncomfortable with her presence in the office, which I touched on in my email earlier this week. Her wardrobe and grooming are somewhat lacking. In a workplace that values style, it is important that we project a certain look to our clients. She is also very dour and unfriendly” (99). Karen's high standards, which seem very difficult to overcome, mixed with the miscommunication on the part of the temp agency when they placed Millie at a business where she would not excel was bound to be disastrous. Millie seems to be at her most self-aware when she receives the message from her representative that she has been fired from Lisa Hopper. Millie thinks, “It's not exactly a liberation, getting what you secretly wanted. This is my sage takeaway from being fired” (139). For as much as Millie hated working in the showroom and despised her coworkers, she finally realized the fear involved in being completely untethered to a financial income. Not only is Millie fired from Lisa Hopper, but because of the strongly worded email that Karen sent, Millie is also dropped from her temp agency.

Butler employs an omniscient narrator for the final chapters of the novel to explain Millie's acceptance and defeat. Millie has worked for years at a telemarketing company that sells

ballet tickets over the phone. The Millie we are given in these chapters is unrecognizable and the tone is justifiably creepy. She is friendly with her coworkers, and she is “Blissfully free. The vast expanse of hours laid out in front of her. The countless hours between now and the end” (191).

The ending of the novel is abrupt. One moment Millie is mourning her job and not taking care of herself to such an extent that the smells coming from her apartment are examined by her downstairs neighbors, and in the next moment, she has grown to love the free time when she is not at her place of work (149). Millie has found that life with a job is miserable, but that life without a job is wholly unbearable – it is the lesser of two evils.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation

Otessa Moshfegh takes two familiar components of the Millennial novel, the disruption of the traditional marriage plot we have seen in Rooney’s novels, and the effects of contemporary job insecurity explored by Butler, and she places those tropes into a new urban setting and earlier time period. Though the novel takes place during the late 1990s, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* still qualifies as a Millennial novel because Moshfegh herself is a Millennial, but more importantly, she views American labor through a skeptical lens. Like Butler, Moshfegh sets her novel in a large American city, this time New York City, and she focuses on a female protagonist who detests her temporary employment. Yet what separates Moshfegh’s Narrator from Butler’s Millie is that while Millie is debilitatingly self-conscious, Narrator has no shame or awareness about any of her actions throughout the novel. Reading these novels in tandem showcases the ways in which Millennial novel protagonists do not have to be one thing. Though these female characters are placed in similar settings (large American cities), have narcissistic tendencies, and

share a similar distaste for their superficial and temporary work, they respond to their challenges differently through various means of avoidance: Millie's humor and Narrator's medications.

Despite the novel being set decades in the past, Moshfegh's narrative reflects the Millennial experience through its descriptions of monotonous, unbearable, and unmeaningful representations of work. Moshfegh sets the novel in the 90s to instill feelings of nostalgia by portraying a world where social media has yet to completely take over, but also feelings of alienation because though recognizable, it is still a far cry from the contemporary world. Moshfegh does not name her protagonist, thereby underscoring her tenuous personal identity and sense of anonymity, of not being seen as more than merely a cog in some professional wheel for another's profit. Though Narrator's qualms with the way the world works will be relatable to many readers, her actions are so extreme that they are meant to be unrecognizable and unfamiliar, furthering the theme of alienation.

Unlike Millie, Narrator has a passionate purpose: sleep. Her need for sleep motivates her to creatively problem solve and work hard so that her mind and body can completely shut off for days at a time. Narrator's dream is not to excel at work or to start a family; instead, she needs "hibernation" in order to "save [her] life."⁴³ This instinctive and animalistic desire for sleep comes from a deep unhappiness, established through avoiding the grief of her parents' death, similar to Millie's despondence, but Narrator's methods of changing her circumstances go much further than Millie's decision to change her wardrobe.

Narrator's lack of self-consciousness is another of the main differences between herself and Millie. Unlike Millie, Narrator has an "amazing wardrobe," which helped her in procuring a job, post-college, as a "gallery girl at Ducat, one of a dozen 'fine art' galleries on West

⁴³ Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 7.

Twenty-first Street” (35). At the same time, Narrator struggles with her identity throughout her adolescence. She explains, “Since adolescence, I’d vacillated between wanting to look like the spoiled WASP that I was and the bum that I *felt* I was and should have been if I’d had any courage” (35). In an examination of existentialism within the novel, Ikram Lecheheb explains Narrator’s perspective:

As a privileged young woman living in the American capitalist society, the main character’s identity was predetermined; as a result, she felt estranged from this identity developing a sense of non-belonging and therefore developing an inner conflict as she finds herself to be torn between two identities: the one she desires to hold and the one her social status provided for her.⁴⁴

For a number of reasons, Narrator has no ambitions other than to sleep as much as she can for as long as she can, but because of the way she looks, and because of the way contemporary society values her looks, she feels forced to be more productive than she ever wanted to be.

Like other Millennial novel protagonists, Narrator is only in her mid-20s, but because of the fast pace of the world, which has only quickened since the 90s, life has already exhausted her. Due to magazines and the expectations of those around her, Narrator has an idea of what and who she should be, and these expectations directly contradict who she thinks she is. The burden of these expectations has resulted in Narrator’s stunted development and her inability to distinguish what is actually beneficial for mental and physical health. In an attempt to become impassioned about something other than sleeping, Narrator applies for work. In her reasoning, she thinks, “I had no big plan to become a curator, no great scheme to work my way up a ladder. I was just trying to pass the time. I thought that if I did normal things – held down a job, for example – I could starve off the part of me that hated everything” (35). Like Millie, Narrator does not see a future in the field that she has been hired to work in. She has little to no ambition, as

⁴⁴ Ikram, “Disconnect,” 137.

well as no financial need to be working, and yet, Narrator needs something to help her pass the time. Malcolm Harris, a journalist and a Millennial himself, attempts to explain the negative work environments left to his generation and explains how advanced technology makes work life more difficult:

There's a contradiction in the premise so far: On the one hand, every kid is supposed to spend their childhood readying themselves for a good job in the skills-based information economy. On the other hand, improvements in productive technology mean an overall decrease in labor costs. That means workers get paid a smaller portion of the value they create as their productivity increases. In aggregate, this operates like a bait and switch: Employers convince kids and their families to invest in training by holding out the promise of good jobs, while firms use this very same training to reduce labor costs. The better workers get, the more money and time we put into building up our human capital, the worse the jobs get.⁴⁵

Narrator lives amid these conditions. In an attempt to better her life, Narrator chooses to work, but instead of adding any value, her occupation decreases her quality of life because the work that is being displayed is purposefully grotesque and because she has no guidance as her boss enables her unhealthy tendencies. She thinks back to her first interview at Ducat:

Natasha, my boss at Ducat, was in her early thirties. She hired me on the spot when I came in for an interview the summer I finished school. I was twenty-two. I barely remember our conversation, but I know I wore a cream silk blouse, tight black jeans, flats – in case I was taller than Natasha...and a huge green glass necklace...I knew not to wear a dress or look too prim or feminine (36).

Narrator knows how valuable appearance can be, especially in the art industry. She knows this but she resents it, thinking, “Being pretty only kept me trapped in a world that valued looks above all else” (35). Not wanting to be an artist herself, Narrator majored in art history in college, enabling her to seek work at a gallery post-graduate. She becomes “the bitch who sat behind a desk and ignored you when you walked into the gallery, a pouty knockout wearing

⁴⁵ Harris, *Kids These Days*, 66.

indecipherably cool avant-garde outfits” (37). In her place of work, Narrator has been told to act as a mannequin. She is told to “play dumb if anyone asked a question” (37). Though true that Narrator lacks ambition, she is not in a job that inspires any ambition either.

Like many Millennials, the Narrator is underpaid for her labor, unable to make a salary that will pay for the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter in New York City. To sit around and ignore potential buyers, Narrator is paid \$22,000 a year (about \$50,000 today). She reminds herself that she is “lucky to have [her] dead parents’ money, [she] knew, but that was also depressing” (37). Generational wealth here is regarded not as a benefit but a liability, even as it sustains her lifestyle. Her morose interior thoughts are triggered by external economic conditions: “New York experienced a significant degree of structural, as opposed to cyclical, economic change in the 1990s. Several major industries have scaled back employment by 20 percent or more...resulting in substantial economic dislocation.”⁴⁶ This “dislocation” manifests not only financially, but also psychologically as shown through Narrator’s inability to quit.

Amid this trenchant account of the dire economic landscape and its effects on the psychology of this Millennial, Moshfegh refuses to suggest that art can provide a counter to labor; both are meaningless.

On a low pedestal in the corner, a small sculpture by the Brahams Brothers – a pair of toy monkeys made using human pubic hair. Each monkey had a little erection poking out of its fur. The penises were made of white titanium and had cameras in them positioned to take crotch shots of the viewer. The images were downloaded to a Web site. A specific password to log in to see the crotch shots cost a hundred dollars. The monkeys themselves cost a quarter million for the pair (39).

Narrator is not the only depiction of someone not accomplishing meaningful work. The examples of art pieces that Moshfegh creates are each more pointless and expensive than the last. If the art

⁴⁶ Parrott, *The State Of Working New York*, 29.

world that Narrator has been placed in does not take itself seriously, it is only natural for her to also not take herself seriously. She acclimates to her surroundings in the only way she knows how – through listening to those around her and taking their view of her to heart. The relationships around Narrator consist of Trevor, an older, aggressive ex-boyfriend who has never treated her right; Reva, her closest ‘friend’ whom she has to be extremely under the influence to be around; Natasha, her boss who only hired her because of her looks; Dr. Tuttle, an easily manipulated physician who believes Narrator’s lies; and finally her mother, who had a short but extremely impactful influence on Narrator before she kills herself.

After about a year of work, Narrator’s priorities shift from desiring normalcy and structure to her need for rest in a world that offers her no respite. She explains, “At work, I took hour-long naps in the supply closet under the stairs during my lunch breaks” (39). It took an entire year of working until Natasha finally saw Narrator as unfit to work at Ducat. During one of her lunchtime naps, Natasha finds Narrator asleep, curled up in the supply closet. Similarly to Millie, Narrator has a resigned acceptance regarding the inevitability of her termination – “I can’t blame Nastaha for wanting to fire me. I’d been napping at work for almost a year by then. Over the final few months, I had stopped dressing up for work” (42). Narrator has finally found the courage to start dressing on the outside like how she feels on the inside. Just as Millie is fired in part for not matching the aesthetic of Lisa Hopper, once Narrator begins to not match what Ducat needs, she is let go.

Narrator’s reaction to her termination mirrors Millie’s, there is fear in the unknown, but overriding the fear is a sense of relief to escape the mindless, never-ending spinning wheel of labor. After her firing Narrator wonders why she didn’t make it happen sooner: “I don’t know why I didn’t just quit. I didn’t need the money. I was relieved when, at last, in June, Natasha

called from Switzerland to fire me” (45). There is a freedom that comes with firing. This relief does not last long for Millie because she knows that she does not have an inheritance to survive on, but the relief does last for Narrator and sets her free.

In both novels, the protagonists have no attachment to their daily work and use various methods to detach themselves from labor, one through mean spirited humor to overcompensate for her own insecurities, and the other through numbing sleep and medication. Both characters are desperate to escape themselves and to be removed from the challenging emotions that threaten to consume them. These emotions peak when they are working their isolating, meaningless, and temporary jobs. They are both fired by superiors who had no business hiring them anyway, showing that incompetence can be prevalent regardless of rank or title. Millie’s novel ends with her embracing her new office job because she now knows that as meaningless and monotonous as the work is, it is better than unemployment. Millie obtains structure and stability at the loss of finding something she is truly passionate about. Narrator, on the other hand, quits her job and is in no rush to re-enter the working world. She files for unemployment which is added to her inheritance, keeping her financially stable. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* concludes on September 11, 2001, and the events of this day remind Narrator that she is truly alive and free. Narrator has found a passion for life and this is achieved because she has made the decision to abandon work, in favor of living life. Unlike Millie, Narrator does not have to give anything up in order to achieve stability. The Millennial novel says that work can be psychologically harmful, and that other than the financial stability that is achieved, it might not be worth the risk.

Chapter 3: The Home

In Kiley Reid's, *Such a Fun Age* (2019) and Raven Leilani's *Luster* (2020), the comforting and familiar 'American dream' is thoroughly dismantled to demonstrate how little it applies to American Millennials. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the American dream as "the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative."⁴⁷ As 'success' is a subjective term, the American dream not only represents a profitable occupation but also a rewarding domestic life. In further analysis of the phrase, the George W. Bush Institute writes, "Perhaps [the American dream] will invoke the symbolic house with a white picket fence that suggests economic self-sufficiency and security; many will associate the phrase with the land of opportunity for immigrants."⁴⁸ The implications of this phrase are recognizable despite its 1910 origin, and it is ideally meant to be obtainable by any person, regardless of skin color. Through both definitions, it is inferred that the two main pillars of the American dream are 1. A successful occupation (obtained through higher education) and 2. A form of land and a heterosexual nuclear family (which the occupation pays for). There has been a distinct departure from these ideals within the Millennial generation. The U.S. birthrate is currently at its lowest level in history and this is attributed to the Millennial generation's domestic habits. *The Washington Post* provides three reasons as to why Millennials are hesitant to start families of their own: 1. Marriage rates have declined, and unmarried people tend to be less likely to have children; 2. Millennials were late to homeownership, which makes it more difficult to have a family; 3. Performance anxiety – due to heavy expectations placed on Millennials from a young age, they would rather have no

⁴⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, "existential (adj.)."

⁴⁸ Churchwell, "American Dream."

domestic life than attempt one and fail at it.⁴⁹ Andrew Van Dam, the researcher and author of this article admits that these reasons do not offer a complete explanation for the heavy decline in birthrates, but they do align with the available statistics.

Reid and Leilani each create a home, owned by a white couple, and then depict how these homes are seen through the eyes of two Millennial-aged Black women – *Such a Fun Age*’s Emira and *Luster*’s Edie. The home is meant to be a sanctuary, but between confusing relationships and unfulfilling jobs, the home is impacted. Emira is a twenty-five-year-old college graduate who is working as a babysitter for Alix Chamberlain’s two daughters, Briar, aged two, and Catherine, less than a year old. Emira is anxious about not having a job that provides healthcare as on her next birthday she will be removed from her parent’s benefits. Alix, at thirty-three years old, is a social media influencer and occasional panel speaker who motivates women in the workplace. Alix becomes obsessed with befriending Emira which results in a depiction of two complex female characters who are a part of the same generation, but who are very different.

Luster’s Edie is a twenty-three-year-old college graduate who is fired from her job in publishing, which causes her to move into the home of the man that she is seeing. This man, Eric, is forty-six years old, is in an open marriage with his wife Rebecca, and has an adopted Black daughter named Akila. It is not Eric who invites Edie to stay with them, but Rebecca. Though Rebecca is openly wary about her open marriage, she is doing whatever it takes to save her marriage. When Edie has nowhere else to turn, Rebecca opens her home to her. In both novels, there is no hero or villain; Edie is not simply a homewrecker, and Rebecca is not a pitiful housewife wondering where her husband is.

⁴⁹ Van Dam, “Millenials aren’t having kids.”

The Millennial characters in these novels do not have the means to support a home, and in response, they find themselves constantly in homes that are not theirs. Within these temporary homes, the Millennial characters form connections, for better or for worse, with the women of the home. The relationships between these women, though largely platonic, completely outshine the romantic relationships that occur between the Millennial women and their men. Emira and Edie, the Millennials, watch Alix and Rebecca have successful work lives while at the same time, struggling with the more domestic aspects of life. Through the traditional domestic setting of the home, the Millennial novel creates a space for an enriched and complex representation of complex female characters.

Such a Fun Age

Emira, a Millennial, does not have the financial means to own a home, which prevents her from feeling like a successful adult. She shares an apartment with a classmate who stays with her boyfriend five days a week. The “tiny fifth-floor walk-up” has “a twin bed, and only one of the stove burners worked, but it was just fine for now.”⁵⁰ Emira’s apartment is used primarily for shelter, and little else. Emira’s friends Shanuie and Josefa live in an apartment together. When Shaunie tells Emira she is planning to move out and into her own place, Emira “was shocked, and then she was jealous, and then she wondered, *Is that what we’re supposed to be doing right now? ‘Cause if it is, I ain’t there*” (131). At twenty-five years old, Emira is insecure and unsure about where she is supposed to live, who she is supposed to live with, and what she is going to do with her life. Emira admits that she “didn’t love doing anything, but she didn’t terribly mind doing anything either” (37). This ambivalence towards labor is a recurring theme in Millennial

⁵⁰ Reid, *Such a Fun Age*, 132.

novels. Shaunie tells Emira that she should move into the room that Shaunie is vacating. Emira's current rent is \$760, of which nearly all of her paychecks go towards. Shaunie's rent, which she describes as "not bad at all," is \$1150, not including utilities (132). Even working two jobs, babysitting and transcribing for the *Green Party Philadelphia*, Emira is unable to take Shaunie's offer.

Conversely, Alix, almost a decade older than Emira, owns a beautiful home but even she is not completely satisfied with it. Alix,

Lived in a three-story brownstone (seven minutes' walk from Rittenhouse Square) on a leafy, shaded street. The house had a massive, marble-floored entryway and a charming kitchen on the second floor. The kitchen counter space was ample, and a table for six underneath a chandelier looked out to the street through a curved wall of windows...Upon seeing these things and realizing their worth, Alix immediately felt a tiny pang of amusement, but then a painful longing to show them to just about anyone (30).

The home is pristine and spacious but for Alix, it has one major flaw – that it's in Philadelphia. As a social media influencer, Alix is very particular about how she presents herself, and a large part of her brand is that she lives in New York City. Alix and her husband, Peter, decide to move from New York to Philadelphia after Alix becomes pregnant with her second child. Though Alix wanted to remain in New York, she and Peter were not making enough money "to comfortably house two children in their current West Side neighborhood" (25). Alix takes photos in bulk when she visits New York and posts them to maintain the ruse that she still lives there. Alix's home, a multi-million dollar secret, contrasts greatly with Emira's apartment. The "grandness of the Chamberlain home, which had once shocked Emira," eventually fades into the background as Emira and Alix's relationship complicates (263).

Alix is surprised by Emira's living situation, which is an example of Alix's privilege, and her financial superiority.

When Emira pushed her front door open and revealed her apartment, Alix thought, *Okay, phew, I can do this*, and then, *Oh man, this is depressing*.

Emira's apartment looked like one of those graduate college dormitories where all the rooms are exactly the same, except the corner ones are slightly bigger, or maybe they have one extra window. The hallway and kitchen floor were cased in puckered linoleum that was meant to resemble wood...Bed Bath & Beyond coupons were stuck to the refrigerator door (253).

This description is a far cry from Alix's own marble-floored entryway, and though lying is a prominent aspect of her job, Alix does a poor job of hiding her reaction to the living space.

Emira's home only endears her more to Alix. After seeing that Emira owns a DVD collection, Alix thinks, "*I love this girl*" (255). Alix's deep feelings for Emira did not occur immediately. It

is only after Peter, who works as a news anchor, makes a racist comment on live television that Alix decides that she should get to know her Black babysitter better. The story covered a high school homecoming proposal where a group of boys danced in the hopes of receiving yeses.

Peter comments "'Let's hope that last one asked her father first'" (34). The "last one" was a Black student. Before Peter's comment, "Alix practically threw Briar into Emira's arms on her way out the door," leaving no time for conversation, but now, with the threat of being labeled as a family of racists, Alix believes befriending Emira will solve the problems (44). The Chamberlain home gets eggs thrown at it because of Peter's racist comment which causes a window to be broken (35). This moment of instigation causes Alix to tell "herself to wake the fuck up...To get to know Emira Tucker" (35). Alix's job relies on her pristine reputation, and the thought of her's being tarnished, Alix is determined to build a relationship with Emira.

Emira and Alix are first introduced through the facilitation of the Internet. After being unable to decide what to do after graduation Emira turns to "SitterTown.com," a website that matches families who need a babysitter with babysitters who can get paid under the table (30).

This representation of technology facilitates communication between employers and their

potential candidates before having to meet in person. Through a profile Emira creates, not unlike a profile for a dating website, she provides a brief bio, days that are convenient for her, and ways to contact her. Emira chooses to forgo adding a photo of herself to her profile. Alix, less than a decade older than Emira, is wary of this new-age hiring process:

The whole thing felt very simulated and impersonal, but Alix had found two of her three Manhattan apartments from sketchy ads on Craigslist, and like the steals she lived in during her twenties, Emira Tucker's profile did not come with a picture. Her description said she was a Temple University graduate, that she knew beginner sign language, and that she could type 125 words per minute. They talked once on the phone before Emira came to the house. And when Alix opened the door and saw Emira for the first time, she found herself once again thinking, *Huh* (30).

This “Huh” is in regard to Emira’s skin color, and Alix does a poor job of hiding her confusion. Emira later thinks back to this moment, “Emira had to stifle her laughter...Mrs. Chamberlain [swung] her door open to reveal a person she’d created in her head and surprise! it was someone much darker” (162). This is the first but not the last time that Alix’s race-related assumptions are made apparent. There is an estimated 48,204 babysitters in the United States in 2024.⁵¹ From this number of registered sitters, 55.6% of these sitters are white, while 9.3% are black or African American.⁵² These statistics somewhat account for Alix’s surprise, as well as Emira’s choice to not include a profile photo. Patricia Hill Collins unpacks the effects of various black female stereotypes in the domestic sphere: “Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women’s behavior.”⁵³ Despite this stereotype and despite the fact that Alix herself grew up with a black

⁵¹ Zippia, “Babysitter Demographics.”

⁵² Zippia, “Babysitter Demographics.”

⁵³ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 72.

nanny, she is still surprised to see someone who looks like Emira. In the present day, this stereotype seems to be statistically untrue, and yet it has not completely disappeared.

While Alix is determined to befriend Emira, Emira wants nothing more than to do her job and leave the Chamberlain house when she is finished. Since the night of the “egging,”

Mrs. Chamberlain started returning home at six forty-five, sitting down across from Emira, and referencing conversations that they’d never had. “Emira, remind me what you majored in?” “Tell me where you live again?” “Did you say that you had any allergies?” The timing couldn’t have been worse. These were the questions you asked at the beginning, not at what Emira was trying to make the end. But for a part-time gig, the money was decent. (55)

Alix’s intentions are complicated because they begin as a selfish means to prove to herself, and potentially others, that she is not racist, but then her feelings develop into a maternal and protective nature, of which Emira is completely taken aback. Alix, having left her friends and a large amount of her confidence back in New York, is simply lonely. When Alix sees Emira, she sees the answer to her racial problems, but she also sees a potential friend and confidant. Alix’s character is difficult to analyze as she is both irritating and obtuse, but too pitiful to be despised.

In an interview Reid explains her inspiration for Alice’s character,

“I wanted characters that were really true to life experience. I feel like humans don't just have one good quality.” She explains: “When I was little, I had girlfriends whose parents loved me, who would invite me over [and] thought I was great. But also they would never want their daughters dating black men. I think that's an important thing about my characters, because both of those sides can exist very harmoniously in the same person. I wanted [to show] both of those sides where people can love someone so much, from a difference race, but also have these racial biases.”⁵⁴

The characters in Millennial novels are oftentimes frustratingly human in their faults and in their decision-making, but this is one of the main qualities that makes these novels interesting to read.

⁵⁴ O’Keeffe, “Fallacy of the American Dream.”

Alix's interest in Emira begins innocently enough through simple questions, but quickly becomes eerie as she increases surveillance into Emira's personal life. One night, after Emira's babysitting duties were over, Alix,

Turned on a playlist with Fleetwood Mac and Tracy Chapman. And as she turned off the bright kitchen lights and left the chandelier blushing over the table, Alix recognized that she was very much courting her babysitter. But the evening reminded her of Fridays with Rachel, Jodi, and Tamra. She hadn't poured a glass of wine for another woman in months (77).

With humor, Alix recognizes that she is attempting to woo her babysitter, but she thinks of her actions as not only harmless but helpful to Emira. Along with giving Emira expensive wine and frozen meals to take home, Alix is especially interested in Emira's romantic life (145).

Unbeknownst to her, Alix checks Emira's phone messages every day she works. Emira, always wanting to be present with Briar, always leaves her phone charging on the entryway table of Alix's home. Without unlocking the phone, Alix scrolls through each notification, takes note of the music Emira was listening to on her walk there, and reads all of the text messages she can. This form of surveillance allows Alix to discover that Emira is seeing someone. This fact does not make Alix jealous, as Alix's interest in Emira is not simply sexual, but it creates a potent desire to know details about the relationship. Despite this strong desire, Alix maintains some composure, she thinks, "She couldn't ask what she really wanted to know, if Emira had slept with him yet, or if sleeping with someone before they were together was a thing Emira did, if sleeping with someone, for her, meant anything at all" (82). These questions are inappropriate for any employer to be thinking about asking an employee, and yet, under the domestic roof the line between professional and personal seems to disappear for Alix.

Alix's unprofessional and disturbing behavior comes to a head as it is revealed that Emira is dating Alix's ex-boyfriend from high school, Kelley, who is one of the main reasons why Alix

jumped into domestic life at a young age. Kelley and Alix had a very messy break-up that involved a young Black student-athlete, a classmate of theirs, being arrested in Alix's backyard. The story is recalled through Alix's perspective, with her opinion that she was just protecting her baby sister from possible harm, while Kelley maintains the opinion that Alix is a racist who had an extreme overreaction (109). This experience has caused Kelley to predominantly date black women and has caused Alix to be hypersensitive and conflicted about race. Alix and Kelley, both white, have brought Emira, a young black woman who is simply trying to find healthcare, into their decade-long argument about race.

Emira is forced to sever ties with the Chamberlain family after Alix goes too far, as even though she believes she loves Emira, she has never listened to her. While babysitting Briar, a middle-aged white woman and a security guard in a grocery store accuse Emira of kidnapping the child because of Emira's skin color and the clothes that she is wearing. Though there is surveillance footage of the hate crime, Emira has no interest in making it public. Alix, on the other hand, sees it as the final step in making Emira family. After manipulating Emira to do a television interview talking about the experience "Alix foresaw this four-minute segment as a moment that would unite her and Emira in a way neither of them could ever take back. Alix felt woozy off how pretty Emira looked, how graciously she'd accepted Alix's advice all weekend, and how she was now in her home without being paid" (279). Alix thought that she knew Emira better than Emira knew herself. Once Emira realizes Alix's manipulation of the situation, she quits her babysitting position and never speaks to Alix again.

The novel ends with the two women separated, but each is forever changed because of the relationship. The hope would be that Alix learned to listen instead of relying on manipulation, and that Emira is now better versed in determining what professional behavior should look like.

That said, the fates of the women are left unknown, ending abruptly once the women are separated. The Millennial novel is concerned with depicting these strange female relationships, but not in prolonging them; they are not meant to last.

Luster

Luster and *Such a Fun Age* share a similar plotline of a young black woman finding herself in the home of a white family for financial reasons, however, Leilani takes her approach with a grittier, more amplified tone. The relationship between Edie and Rebecca cannot be understood without first mentioning Edie's relationship with Rebecca's husband, Eric. With a twenty-three-year-old age difference, Edie and Eric meet through a dating website. Their emails and text messages are reminiscent of Rooney's romantic online discourses, yet the two decades of age difference, already something difficult to forget, is magnified through their varied use of technology. Edie points out, "In his first message, he points out a few typos in my online profile and tells me he has an open marriage."⁵⁵ Eric is trying to better Edie in their first chat messages together because he has a desire to take care of her, educationally, physically, and sexually. This is not for a love of Edie but for a love of control, something Eric does not have in his marriage. Though Edie's relationship with Eric is the primary opportunity for Leilani to discuss issues of age and power relations, Edie's relationship with Rebecca is far more nuanced and enlightening.

Edie is embarrassed about the state of her apartment, as she knows that it is not a home.

Regrettably, on Sunday [Eric] is climbing the stairs to my apartment because it is the only private place I know where I might coerce him out of his clothes. The salmon smell is gone, but my roommate is on the couch clipping her toenails in her terrifying vitamin C sheet mask and up until this point I have sufficiently hidden the extent of my poverty. But

⁵⁵ Leilani, *Luster*, 3.

now he is going to see the puckered linoleum and the casserole dishes collecting water in our bathroom...when he comes up the stairs, his face is shiny and incredulous, like what happened to him is terrible but he is impressed enough by the novelty to persevere. (35)

This is the first and only time that Eric comes to Edie's apartment. Edie is justifiably self-conscious as Eric is very critical of her apartment. Edie appreciates Eric's home in New Jersey as she "relish[es] the wave of cicadas rippling the air," and his "mailbox with a flag and Walker on the side in a jaunty yellow font" (39). Edie is able to appreciate the little things about Eric's home.

The unconventionality of the relationships in the novel displays that it is not only Millennials who are turning away from the traditional relationship structures. Before Edie ever met Rebecca in person, she met her on paper. Before handing Edie a list of rules that Rebecca has written on a piece of paper, Eric explains, "'My life is established. I have been married to the same woman for thirteen years and our graves are right next to each other'" (31). Eric wants to be with Edie because she makes him feel needed, while Rebecca is too self-sufficient to rely on Eric in that way. Edie wants to be with Eric because she doesn't like to be alone and feels separated from people her own age due to how quickly she had to grow up after her mother's death.

Edie and Rebecca's first meeting is much more action-packed than Edie and Eric's online chat messages. Edie breaks into Rebecca's home, after Eric begins ignoring her messages. When she is found by Rebecca, the two women chase each other in and outside of the home until Rebecca falls, causing Edie to pause. They speak to each other for the first time:

"I know who you are but I don't want to discuss it, if that's all right with you," she says, dusting herself off. "I just wasn't finished looking at you. I didn't expect you to be so young. It's awful."
"Awful?"

“Yes, for you.” (49-50)

Rebecca is not exactly welcoming towards Edie, but seeing as Edie is the woman whom her husband is having a romantic relationship with, she is not too brutal. Rebecca then forces Edie to attend her and Eric’s fourteen-year anniversary party. Rebecca’s actions are complex as it is obvious that she is not thrilled by the fact that her husband is seeing someone else and she does not want to talk about it, but she also prevents Edie from leaving. Rebecca is a pathologist whose job is to carry out autopsies. Rebecca is also, at her core, a problem solver: “She was a kid who dismantled all her toys, that it disturbed her mother but her father understood and started buying her things she could assemble from scratch – clocks and cars and model airplanes” (187). As someone who appreciates dissecting things, it is unsurprising that Rebecca would grow into a woman who dissects her own relationships; she attempts to find the exact amount of give and take that a marriage can handle. She feels threatened by Edie, but her intrigue outweighs her fear.

Edie is fired from her job at the publishing company and then soon receives notice that her rent is increasing, making her soon to be homeless (88). During a chance encounter, Edie and Rebecca run into each other, causing them to discuss Eric, and though he is the subject of the conversation, they are very perceptive of each other’s feelings. Edie begins the conversation:

“We don’t talk about you,” I say, wondering if it will hurt her. I resent her presumption that we would talk about her at all until I see her disappointment.

“We talk about you,” she says...

“And you like that? Hearing about what we do?”

“It’s not that I like it. But I like to be informed. Control for variables. I know that’s not your thing.”

“How would you know?”

“Because you don’t care who’s on the other side of the door” (95).

Rebecca makes an assumption when she says that Edie doesn't care about the potential harm she could be causing to Rebecca's marriage, but her assumption happens to be correct. After this conversation, Edie has nowhere to go since her apartment is no longer hers, and since Rebecca is still trying to find out why her husband has chosen Edie, they both go to the Walker house.

Though more physically comfortable than her now lost apartment, Edie cannot relax in Eric and Rebecca's home. She thinks, "I'm aware of the breadth of the house, even as I try to take up as little space as possible. I'm aware that the room is owned, each square foot considered and likely free of mice" (100). It is less kindness and more of a scientific interest that causes Rebecca to invite Edie into her home, but it helps Edie nonetheless. Edie notes, "That Rebecca also appears uncomfortable is comforting to me" (101). Neither Edie nor Rebecca knows exactly what games the other is playing, as they barely seem to understand their own actions.

When Edie temporarily moves into the Walker home, Eric is on a business trip which removes him from the event and allows Edie to see the domestic lives of Rebecca and Akila without him. In one scene, Edie looks out the window to find Rebecca doing yard work. She is "the only person outside, already engaged enough in her task to be making a lot of supremely unsexy noise. It becomes clear to me, how keenly she is alone" (121). As Edie spends more time away from Eric and more time with Rebecca, she loses interest in him and begins to understand Rebecca better.

When Eric arrives home from his business trip, Edie notices that the dynamic in the home is negatively affected. "With Eric in the house [Rebecca] is dimmer, more exact, her circuit brief and preordained, this clockwork to particular it feels precarious, vulnerable to a single, badly chosen word. I want to talk about how things were before Eric came back" (155). When the man returns to the home, the women, in this case Rebecca and Akila, are forced to become serious.

The joy within the home, which was already quite strained, is removed completely when Eric returns. The Millennial novel does not hate men but does find special room for its female characters to find deeper connections with each other.

Like many of her fellow Millennial novel protagonists, Edie compartmentalizes her trauma, and she uses painting as a means of working through it. Art and death are never too far apart for Edie. One of Edie's earliest pieces is a painting of her recently overdosed mother. Rebecca says, "'The painting of your mother is your best one,' she says, and I think of the Polaroid camera, of my excitement to capture an unwilling subject while she slept. I think of the photo and its swift revision of a sleeping woman into a dead one" (187). The painting, which is initiated through innocent intentions, turns dark and deep, but no less moving. Unlike many of her fellow Millennial characters, Edie has a passion that she is talented at, but she needs stability to be able to do what she loves. Rebecca also has a passion that she is talented at.

"Imagine living life so carefully that there are no signs you lived at all," she says. "I thought I was going to be a surgeon. Then my first year of med school, we got our first cadavers, and there was so much data inside. You can be sure a patient will lie about how much they drink or how much they smoke, but with a cadaver, all the information is there." She lights another cigarette and sighs. "It's like walking through a stranger's house and touching all their things" (98).

A unique profession that is not typically written aligns perfectly with Rebecca's character. Rebecca is occupationally successful, she has an open marriage, and she has an adopted daughter who is Black. Though not a Millennial character, Edie finds a kindred spirit in Rebecca as both separate from traditional structures. Rebecca's job is physically demanding and mentally stabilizing. When Rebecca shares her occupation with Edie, it is as though she is offering Edie a

bit of her own personal peace. The irony comes from the fact that Rebecca's peace comes from spending time with dead bodies while listening to Hall & Oates on the local radio station (97).

Edie and Rebecca, though separated by race, age, and financial stability see each other in ways that Eric cannot. Though it was Eric who reignited Edie's love for painting, the last scene of the novel depicts Rebecca becoming Edie's muse:

I arrange her into the position I want, one limb at a time, until she is taut. There is no coy, lingering touch, though I can feel her expectation of me when I press an arch into her back...I see her seriousness, the way she remains as she was arranged, and the work begins on its own...When this is done, there is no ceremony. There are no words, and she lets herself out...When I am alone with myself, this is what I am waiting for someone to do to me, with merciless, deliberate hands, to put me down onto the canvas so that when I'm gone, there will be a record, proof that I was here (226).

Edie says that her only desire is to be changed by someone and to have them remember her. It is not Eric that fits this description, but Rebecca. In author Tiphonie Yanique review of the novel she says, "I am tired of cynical books about intelligent but self-destructive young women who try to make their lives in New York City and then end up getting, both literally and figuratively, screwed... True, it is, for a change, narrated by a young Black woman – but there is also a white saviour at its centre, so that novelty is swiftly cancelled out."⁵⁶ By the end of her review, Yanique admits that despite all of this she did enjoy her experience reading it. Millennial novels have a tendency to be extremely cynical about each structure of contemporary life. The bright, non-cynical light in these novels is the complex and challenging female characters and their relationships with each other.

⁵⁶ Yanique, "Girl, Wife, Lover," 17.

The Chamberlain and Walker homes are fraught with conflict which bleeds into life outside of the home. Each novel concludes with Emira and Edie leaving their respective homes where they worked, which comes to each of them as a relief, but neither Millennial novel's ending is completely satisfying. Emira finds stability once she leaves the Chamberlain home, but still lacks a passion, while Edie has found a passion for painting, she still lacks stability by the end of the novel. For better, or for worse, the relationships between the female characters, in both novels, have deeply impacted their lives

Conclusion

Love it or hate it, the Millennial novel is a force with which to be reckoned. They depict brutally honest depictions of awkward first dates, the painful monotony of office jobs, and complex female characters. And while these may seem like the problems of young adults in the Millennial generation, based on their critical and commercial success, it is obvious that these novels speak to more than one generation. Sally Rooney's novels inspired this project. Whether her novels deserve the accolades they receive, her voice irrefutably has helped amplify the tales of other Millennial authors. More generally, the Millennial novel successfully depicts how traditional structures are actively changing and adapting to fit the new social and psychological contours of the Millennial generation. These works, as evidenced by those studied across the thesis, encapsulate a moment in time felt by a specific age group of people worldwide. Their distanced tone and emotional flatness are features that may thwart these novels from being labelled inspiring, but it does make them honest. The Millennial novel in this way captures the confusing aspects of the contemporary moment, seeking to showcase the aspects of this generation that move beyond the stereotypes of entitlement, thwarted personal development, and disengaged "job hoppers" often attributed to this generation.

The Millennial novel is a capacious term, allowing many novels to be bestowed the title. Limiting this research to seven novels was challenging and many valuable novels had to be left out. Some novels that were considered for this research, but ultimately not used were *Severance* by Ling Ma, *Happy Hour* by Marlowe Granados, and *Exciting Times* by Naoise Dolan.

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