

## Impoverished and Threatened: The Erosion of the Middle Class and the Novel of the 21st Century

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Department of English Literature

Bachelor of Arts in English Literature  
Minors in Creative Writing and Communications

Impoverished and Threatened: The Erosion of the Middle Class and the Novel of  
the 21st Century

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## Abstract

This thesis focuses on contemporary novelistic representations of the growing anxiety of the Western middle class in relation to the economic and social crises experienced by this social group in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through a post-Marxist approach, and with the help of tools drawn from economic theory, the first part of the thesis unveils the various ways in which the so-called ‘erosion’ of the middle class is represented in four contemporary novels—*The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen, *NW* by Zadie Smith, *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* by Dave Eggers, and *Normal People* by Sally Rooney. The final part, instead, is entirely dedicated to issues of form. First, a direct relationship between the middle class and the literary form of the novel is established. Then, the author discusses the various formal choices made by the authors of the novels with the aim to discern which stylistic approach is most suited to the expression of the collective consciousness of the middle class in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Eventually, *Normal People* is recognized as the more innovative and qualified work of the group, and it is suggested that Rooney’s book may provide a model for the development of the genre in the remainder of the century.

*To my mentor and teacher, Daisaku Ikeda.*

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# 1. Introduction

## Anatomy of a crisis

The title-track of the album “I soldi sono finiti” (‘There is no more money’) by the Italian indie-rock band Ministri ends with the following five verses:

*Amiamo i nostri vestiti*

*Nessuno potrà mai levarceli*

*Un giorno ci siamo giurati*

*Che sarebbero stati gli unici*

*Ma i soldi sono finiti*

This song – published in 2006, two years before the financial crisis of 2008 – was originally written to comment on the problems of the discographic industry in the wake of the popularization of illegal peer to peer download software programs, which generated massive economic losses in discographic majors but most importantly crippled a whole generation of small independent authors, musicians, and producers in the industry. Reading these words some fourteen years later – and imagining to apply them to broader and more general subjects of culture and society – one cannot but feel that they say something crucial about the atmosphere of the 21st century, at least for a certain group of people who are living in it. This group to which I refer to is that to which virtually also the Ministri belong: the 21st century Western middle class.

1 We love our clothes / No one will ever take them from us / One day we swore / We would have wore them only / But there is no more money.



A class whose members were raised to develop expectations, habits, and living standards that are now being denied to them in the face of an economic system that cannot anymore maintain its promises. The clothes Ministri swore would have been the only ones they would wear are ultimately their social identity, denied to them – and to most of the contemporary middle class – because ‘there is no more money.’

The principal claim of this thesis is the following: the Western middle class of the 21st century is confronted with an array of historical, economic, social, and political developments that threaten its solidity and its ability to reproduce itself. Decades of welfare dismantling, free-market policies, and financial crashes have been progressively eroding the middle class, throwing it into an epochal crisis. Analyzing four novels from the 21st century - *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen; *NW* by Zadie Smith; *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And The Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* by Dave Eggers; and *Normal People* by Sally Rooney – I will look into how the contemporary novel interprets through narrative, character, and form the crisis of the middle class, also with attention to the cultural significance of such representations for this social group. The aim of this thesis can therefore be summed up into two distinct and yet strictly related questions: how is the crisis of the middle class represented in the novel of the 21st century? What *kind* of novel is most suited to speak for the eroded, 21st century middle class?

This chapter serves a number of purposes in preparation to the specifically literary nature of this thesis: it analyzes the crisis of the modern middle class in the first two decades of the new century from the point of view of economics, as well as its apparent ‘erosion’ and shrinking in the body of society; it discusses the sociological and psychological fallout of such traumatic developments, presenting a number of concepts that will be used repeatedly to analyze the novels; and finally, it proposes a tentative re-definition of the concept of ‘middle-class’ in the

current era, in which some of the traits that distinguished this social group in the past have gotten less clear to discern and less distinctive in themselves.

As it is evident from my thesis statement, this dissertation is far-reaching and ambitious in its aims. Perhaps it is even *too* ambitious. The limited space I am accorded for this thesis will necessarily make it rather dense, and at times the reader may have the impression that certain claims I make or certain topics I investigate should be given more space to be clarified. Despite the inevitable incompleteness of some parts of the thesis, I nevertheless deemed of absolute importance and interest the overall subject of the dissertation. I therefore confide in the tolerance and good disposition of my readers in condoning the many demands I make on them, hoping that the analyses and conclusions I propose will be as insightful and engaging as they were for me in formulating them.

Furthermore, the preparatory claims presented in the remainder of this chapter are argued with no illusion to be comprehensive nor definitive. First of all, the phenomena described and referred to are by their own nature transitory and impermanent. Secondly, it is crucial to understand how the non-literary theories I refer to are here nothing but, indeed, *references*. They only serve the purpose of presenting certain aspects of the reality of today's middle class, without the intention (at least here) to be all-encompassing and all-explaining. They are reported here to outline a 'theoretical field' and identify a certain atmosphere that pervades the social reality of the contemporary middle class and of the novels that attempt to represent it.

This thesis does not intend to pursue absolute and comprehensive claims even in geographical terms. The socio-economic realities of the various countries of the West are far too complex and different from one another to be treated all in such a short work as an undergraduate thesis. The space required to discuss the same similar issues in profoundly

different countries like, for instance, Germany, Italy, Japan, France, Portugal, or Poland would be far too much. Therefore, this text only deals with the Anglo-Saxon ‘sphere’ of the world. Ideally, the field was to be restricted to the sole UK and USA, by virtue of a number of shared events and characteristic between these two countries (a momentous ‘neoliberal season’ in the 1980s, the tremendous importance of finance and financial products in their economies, a similar impact of the 2008 crisis...). However, Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*, set in Ireland, is far too relevant to the issues presented below to be ignored. Thus, the thesis restricts to the discussion of such aspects in only three countries: the UK, the USA, and the Republic of Ireland.

#### **40 years of trauma**

The economic history of the erosion of the middle class has its starting point sometime around the end of the 1970s. The election of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and of Ronald Reagan in the United States marked the beginning of a so-called ‘conservative revolution’ loaded with consequences for the middle class. The political orthodoxy to which these two leaders adhered, neoliberalism, was structured around a recovery of key concepts of classical Smithian economics such as market deregulation and, generally speaking, a reduced impact of the State over private economic activities and transactions. This neoclassical agenda was elaborated in direct opposition to the then dominant Keynesian paradigm, based on strong public intervention to sustain demand and reduce unemployment. After the end of World War II, the West had entered a long period of economic expansion and increased social mobility in which the US and its allies saw their GDP increase by 5-6% points annually. In consequence of this, millions of people entered stably the ranks of a new, unprecedentedly large consumer class (to be fair, in the US this period of expansion started even before the break out of the war with Roosevelt’s ‘New

Deal,' a practically direct application of Keynesian principles to the American economy).

Throughout the 50s and 60s, things seemed like they could only get better for the middle class: the success of the Keynesian model was incontestable and appeared to be unstoppable. In the first half of the 1970s, however, a series of destabilizing events – the 1973 oil crisis, the global recession that followed it, and partly also the momentous expansion of Socialism in Africa, South America, and South-East Asia – triggered a political reaction that culminated in the rise of neoliberalism.

Aside from the ideological discourse that marked the Reagan and Thatcher administrations – and in spite of the fact that their actual politics were far less coherent to the precepts of neoclassical economics than their speeches and slogans suggested – the conservative revolution had a significant and immediate impact on the global economy, and even more incisive repercussions on the conditions of the middle class. The deregulation of the financial market, the attenuation of progressive income taxes for the bigger earners, the massive privatization of formerly public companies and services, the de-industrialization of the economic system (especially in Britain), and the calls for flexibility in the job market are all processes initiated in the 1980s. Over the course of the decades, these processes accentuated economic inequalities, progressively impoverishing that very new consumer middle class that had emerged in the decades after the war. This trend was then further precipitated by the 2000 dotcom bubble and most importantly by the Great Recession. The result is that in the first two decades of the 21st century – and even more so in the second decade – the economy that has stopped growing as fast as it used to, the extremely wealthy are increasingly *more* wealthy at an increasingly *faster* rhythm, and large sections of the middle class have to confront an 'ontological uncertainty' that threatens to push them back into the lower strata of the socio-economic hierarchy.

The contemporary economic landscape, and the implications of relevance to this thesis, can perhaps be best understood through the lenses of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century*. In his monumental work, the French economist analyzes the current conditions of capitalism, simultaneously explaining how the contemporary situation was brought about and attempting to predict future developments. Piketty's main claim is that

“If the rates of population and productivity growth are relatively low, then accumulated wealth naturally takes on considerable importance, especially if it grows to extreme proportions and becomes socially destabilizing” (25)<sup>2</sup>.

That is to say, essentially, that economic inequality between the top 1% (or even 0.1%) owners and all the rest of the population increases drastically in conditions like the present ones. Such rising inequality, Piketty adds, is mainly driven by two *divergence factors*: “the increasing gap between higher wages and all other salaries” and “the establishment of a number of imbalances relative to the processes of accumulation and concentration of capital” (46). What is important here is that both of these factors appear as the consequence of specific *political* decisions. In other words, they are not the product of some teleological necessity of modernity and/or capitalism, but instead are the result of particular choices made at specific moments in the recent past. This led commentators like David Harvey to claim that neoliberalism had been a “political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic élites” (19). Moreover, Piketty argues that the fact that the rate of the return on

<sup>2</sup> An English translation of Piketty's book has been published by Harvard University Press. However, the restrictions on personal movement imposed by the COVID-19 outbreak in Italy resulted in the impossibility of consulting such translation. Therefore, the quotations from *Capital in the 21st Century* included in this thesis have been translated by me.

capital is significantly higher than the annual rate of GDP growth (a condition common to most Western countries today) implies that

“It is almost inevitable that capital obtained through inheritance will extensively prevail on capital accumulated during the work of a lifetime, and that the concentration of capital will reach staggering levels that are potentially incompatible with the values of meritocracy and with the principles of social justice which constitute the foundation of our modern democratic societies” (50-1).

This is in perfect tune with what also Allan Ornstein argues by affirming that [class] “counts more today than yesterday” and that “[the] principles of democracy ... are being threatened by increasing inequality and a diminishing middle class” (5). Ornstein, too, is concerned by the “gaps [that] are growing between the rich ... [the] super rich ... and the rest of us,” and perfectly identifies the apprehension of a society that “is being divided into separate estates” through the use of “catch phrases” that “harshly sort people into ‘winners’ and ‘losers,’ suggesting a struggling and shrinking middle class” (Ibidem, 6).

The fact that the contemporary middle class – a class that, as I shall observe below, today includes the overwhelming majority of the population in developed countries – suffers from a quite evident crisis of meritocracy and social justice seems to be clearly signaling that the group as a whole is in a critical situation. That is not to say, of course, that the relative impoverishment of the Western middle class is happening overnight. When I refer to it as an erosion, I intend to point to the slow, at times even imperceptible process of destabilization of a social group that over the past forty years has no doubt seen a few highly dramatic moments (the Recession), but that most generally saw its socio-economic solidity fade slowly, gradually, but inexorably.

To be completely fair to Piketty, however, it should be noted that he is highly skeptical of those who see the conservative revolution of the 1980s as the sole initiator of the problems of the contemporary middle class. Piketty's work has the virtue (but perhaps also the limitation) of being concerned with long-term trends: his analysis covers a span of more than three centuries of economic history, and this extremely large time-span allows him to express a number of times throughout the book the belief that neoliberal hegemony made a relatively little difference in regards to trends of inequality. However, it would be unreasonable to ignore the extensively *symbolic* meaning that the Reagan-Thatcher era had on the collective consciousness of the middle class. If the conservative revolution has not drastically impacted the long-term trends of economic inequality, it has certainly shaped the collective discourse on the subject. As such, it constitutes a powerfully symbolic moment in the emergence of a self-awareness of a crisis in the contemporary middle class.

### **Capitalist Realism and the impoverished class**

In the previous section I have described the economic history that has shaped the current precarious condition of the middle class. Now I move on to consider the social and psychological effects of this crisis: what was the effect of these traumatic forty years of neoliberal deregulations and financial disasters on the collective conscience of the contemporary middle class?

To answer this question – and to further enrich my basic theoretical framework for the analysis of the novels – I will focus primarily on two texts: *Capitalism Realism* by Mark Fisher and *Teoria della classe disagiata* (“Theory of the impoverished class”) by Raffaele Alberto Ventura. These two works – the first published in 2009, right after the financial crisis; the second

in 2017 – will help me in the understanding of the events and characters presented in the novels by providing fundamental notions that link the sphere of the macro-economic with that of middle class life and culture.

Fisher's essay is more discursive than systematic, but it nevertheless provides interesting insights that are useful in comprehending the cultural impact of the economic turbulences of the past decades. His concept of 'capitalist realism' is a virtual opposite of that of 'socialist realism' promoted in the USSR during the 1930s. Fisher's choice of terminology, of course, is anything but fortuitous: with the term 'capitalist realism,' the author intends to suggest how neoliberalism has transformed itself into a sort of transparent totalitarianism, a dystopic superstructure of *soft control* that imposes its dogmas subtly by preaching unrestrained personal liberty and yet preventing any possibility of thinking outside of the scheme of neoliberal economics. As he defines it, capitalist realism is "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2). That of capitalist realism, therefore, is a suffocating atmosphere of inevitability, "a [deep, pervasive] sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility" (Fisher 7). In relation to the middle class, we may interpret the concept of capitalist realism as the cultural-psychological expression of the distress of this social group that today, after decades of progressive destabilization, feels unable to escape the dramatic reality of post-welfare de-regulated capitalism.

Rather than on broad cultural atmospheres, Ventura focuses instead on a specific social group: the more fragile section of the contemporary middle class. This group, which he defines *classe disagiata* (impoverished class), is made up of all those members of the middle class who have been 'betrayed' by a political and economic system that promised them social mobility and



continuous accumulation of wealth, but failed to deliver on such promises and instead left them to confront the threat of impoverishment. Similarly to Fisher, also Ventura's concept of *classe disagiata* was inspired by another, earlier term. In this case, the definition to which the author refers to is that of *leisure class* (in Italian 'classe agiata,' of which of course 'disagiata' is the negative opposite) formulated by Thorstein Veblen. Ventura's book, therefore, describes "that large section of the middle class" which in the matter of a few decades passed from leisure class to impoverished class: that is to say, from the perspective of ceaseless upward mobility to the threat of being pushed back into the lower strata of the social hierarchy. The tragedy of this impoverished class is not that of being poor—after all it is not a poor class; quite the opposite, it is a class that enjoys many of the comforts of middle class life. Its tragedy, Ventura argues, is that of having been raised with aspirations that go beyond the possibilities that the system offers: the impoverished class is therefore "too rich to renounce to their aspirations, and yet too poor to realize them" (Ventura 11).

The existence of the impoverished class (a term that more or less coincides with the concept of 'eroded middle class') is therefore marked by the problem of *relative* wealth. And as such, it is structured through a dynamic of *positional arms races*. This term, as Robert Frank explains it, refers to targeted expenditure for *positional goods*, those goods for which "the link between context and evaluation [in regards to a choice] is strongest" (24). In other words, positional goods are goods that, by virtue of possessing them, signal 'membership' to a specific (wealthy) social group. By continuously squandering their money in the attempt to 'position' themselves as wealthy, members of the middle class progressively eroded their resources, thereby 'transforming' into members of the impoverished class. As Ventura notes, "among the

leisure class, and therefore also among the impoverished one, positional goods are the most vital of goods, for they are used to establish social roles and regulate the access to resources” (15).

That of the impoverished class is therefore a valuable conceptual tool to interpret the crisis of the middle class, and particularly so in relation to the psychology of individuals (and therefore also of fictional characters). It may even be argued that the impoverished class is specifically the product of the crisis of the middle class, as it encompasses a vast and heterogeneous array of seemingly unrelated cases inside this social group. As Ventura puts it:

The concept I propose of impoverished class includes a broad spectrum of individuals, all characterized by the dysphoric experience of downward mobility: from the fallen nobleman to the petit bourgeoisie who has to come to terms with the failure of his project for upward mobility; from the ‘creative’ who accumulates visibility in the hope to become successful in a business far too crowded to the wage worker who witnesses his or her line of work threatened by technological advancement or by delocalization; along with all those who, renouncing to their own inclinations, manage to obtain relative material wellbeing, perhaps at the cost of suffering from stress and depression. [...] All of them experience a disharmony between their perceived social identity and their actual resources that characterizes the impoverished class (17).

Therefore, in my analysis of the novels, I shall look at both signs of the presence of capitalist realism and of the impoverished class in the representations of the contemporary middle class. But before delving into literary analysis, the concept of ‘contemporary middle class’ needs to be clarified.

## **What we talk about when we talk about the middle class**

The usual categorization of classes in the modern era, partly inherited by the French Revolution and partly derived by Marxist analysis, consists of three general social groups: the upper classes (or aristocracy), the bourgeoisie/middle class, and the working class (more or less Marx's proletariat). It could be said that, generally speaking, this is the common, 'standard' idea of how society is ideally divided. However, it is evident that such a model is utterly inappropriate for the representation of the structure of Western societies in the 21st century. First of all, because the aristocracy, having lost both economic and political hegemony, has evaporated and become solely a sort of nostalgic reminder of an era long gone. Secondly, and most importantly, because with the advent of neoliberal policies of de-industrialization and delocalization, also the working class seems to have disappeared (or at least to have drastically shrunk).

The result of these economic and historical developments is that today's Western societies are virtually populated only by members of the middle class. Or, to put it differently, the values, the standards, the aspirations of the *bourgeoisie* have contaminated all the other groups of society, thus imposing themselves as the norm. It is therefore natural to ask: in a thesis that focuses specifically on the crisis of the middle class, what does the term 'middle class' really mean? The categorization of social classes in contemporary Western societies is clearly not part of the aims of this thesis. Yet, a conceptual model for the understanding of what constitutes the middle class is needed, even if provisional and tentative. What I offer below, therefore, is precisely such a tentative model, with the sole aim of clarifying what section of society I am specifically concentrating on in this thesis.

To a considerable extent, it *is* true that the middle class has expanded to incorporate other classes. The advent of consumer society and, later, of neoliberalism really did expand the

number of those who – through their work aspirations, their consumer choices etc. – identify as middle class. With ‘middle class,’ I intend to refer in this thesis to all those individuals who either rely on their job to survive (both as freelancers or employees) or who cannot afford enormous amounts of organized workforce to lead their activities.

As it is immediately evident, this categorization makes the middle class a rather broad group, seemingly excluding only the owners of large corporations and multinational companies. In fact, these constitute in my model a separate group, which more or less performs symbolically the role that the upper classes had in previous centuries. As for what is *below* the middle class, the idea is that Marx’s proletariat has not disappeared, but instead only became invisible: today’s lower-class is composed by all the *invisibles* – chiefly undocumented migrants – who are nevertheless fundamental to the functioning of post-industrial economies (a perfect example are the undocumented workers employed in the Italian food industry under the rule of so-called *caporalato*).

To conclude, this broad (and tentative) redefinition of the concept of middle class will allow me to navigate the novels I intend to analyze without the need to spend too many words to clarify potential contradictions in the social status of certain characters, as in this model these inconsistencies prove to be only *false* inconsistencies.

## 2. Intimations of decline: *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen

*“Depression years changed me. they changed the meaning of a dollar.”*

*“An economic depression, we’re talking about”* (Corrections 21).

Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* was published in 2001, right after the ‘market correction’ of the 2000 dotcom bubble (at which the title hints), but almost a decade before the 2008 crash. This sort of in-betweenness puts the novel in an interesting position, and makes it interesting in particular ways to today’s readers. In Franzen’s tale about the mid-western Lambert family it is possible to read *ex ante* many of the signs of the middle class’ distress – many of those who have become distinctive signs of the frightened contemporary middle class. In general terms, the novel follows the private dramas of two generations of Lamberts at the very end of the 20th century: on the one hand, the old parents, Enid and Alfred, who have to deal with serious issues of mental illness (most importantly Alfred’s Alzheimer’s) and with the disastrous consequences of many of their past choices as individuals and as parents; on the other, Enid and Alfred’s three kids – Chip, Gary, and Denise – who in the middle of their adults lives have to face both the demons of their traumatic adolescences and the absurdities of the social order of late capitalism.

What made *The Corrections* an innovative work at the time of its publication – and a particularly interesting one for this thesis – was how the author ‘updated’ the form of the social novel through the connection between the internal, private, inter-relational conditions of his

characters and the external, broader, general realities of a market economy on the verge of the explosion of a financial bubble. As James Annesley notes,

Offering precise descriptions of a world shaped by international politics, new technologies, consumer economics, and the free market, he [Franzen] sets out ... to link his portrait of the Lambert family with a vision of globalization's complex combination of forces. The familial and the domestic are thus known in relation to broader panoramas of global change (111).

This feature, which led Susanne Rohr to define the book as a “novel of globalization,” lends itself perfectly to the purposes of this thesis (103). In an almost (but never quite) explicit way, *The Corrections* is an ‘anthology’ of representations of the anxieties of a middle class that is increasingly aware of the threats that a free-market economy poses to its social reproduction. In this sense, the novel stages through its plot and its characters many of the private and collective disturbances afflicting the middle class in the 21st century: from the disintegration of social structures on both the familial and national level to the brutality of internal competition; from the generational conflicts triggered by insecurities on the future to the unsubstantiality of the careers of the younger generation (as opposed to the ‘industrial solidity’ of their fathers’ professions); from the contradictions of a booming economy about to crash to the apparent plague of mental diseases. Therefore, I analyze here a number of such representations to evaluate and comment upon how the book interprets through a fictional narrative the reality of the history unfolding outside of its pages.

## The ruins of the family

In many ways, the Lamberts can be seen as representative for something more than themselves. In their ‘hermetic’ midwestern whiteness – that is: in Franzen’s attempt at representing a quintessential Americanness uncomplicated by race nuances – it is possible to read the Lamberts as a *soft* symbol for the American middle class. I say ‘soft’ because assuming that this family is a perfect allegory for a certain group in American society would be condemning Franzen to the basest unoriginality in literature, and most importantly it would risk to turn this interpretation into a kind of childish game. It would be equally ludicrous, however, not to acknowledge the evidence of the fact that the Lamberts are a powerful catalyst in Franzen’s hands to articulate his social commentary. To a certain significant extent, their ‘corrections,’ their neuroses, their private turmoils are the same as those of the Western middle class in crisis.

In this sense, the Lambert house in the fictional Kansan town of St. Jude serves an important role. From the first few pages of the novel, when Enid visits Alfred’s room in the basement, the reader gets a vague sense of the symbolic meaning that – among many other signs of untidiness and disorder – a workshop that has become “home to a colony of mute, dust-colored crickets” may hold (*Corrections* 8). It is only when references to this domestic chaos are reiterated, however, that the symbol starts to make a little more sense. In a flashback scene around a third into the book, we get to read about Gary’s inspection of the house he grew up in. The resulting picture is, to any house owner, rather disquieting:

Gary took a morning to inspect the whole property slowly, inside and out. He found cracks in the grouting, rust lines in the bathroom sinks, and a softness in the master bedroom ceiling. He noticed rain stains on the inner wall of the back

porch, a beard of dried suds on the chin of the old dishwasher, an alarming thump in the forced-air blower, pustules and ridges in the driveway's asphalt, termites in the woodpile, a Damoclean oak limb dangling above a dormer, finger wide cracks in the foundation, retaining walls that listed, whitecaps of peeling paint on window jambs ... everywhere he looked the sag of entropy. (*Corrections* 181-2)

It appears that the conditions of the Lambert's house expresses metaphorically the decaying status of the middle class. The economic stability of this social group – of which the house is perhaps the most concrete and visible correlative – is quite literally falling to pieces. What is interesting, however, is how an awareness of this precarious condition is possible only through a slow, 'inside-out' inspection. In other words, Franzen seems to be implying that the contemporary middle class desperately tries to conceal its fragility by pushing problems and insecurities into the domain of the not immediately visible, thus retaining the façade of prosperity even in the face of unsettling threats to it (and in this sense, the basement is of course a particularly powerful symbol).

But it is the whole permanence of the concept of traditional middle class family that Franzen seems to be questioning. In the middle of one of Gary's depressive crises, the author makes his readers aware of the Lambert's firstborn anxieties about family life:

But to Gary it seemed that the nature of family life itself was changing—that togetherness and filiality and fraternity weren't valued the way they were when he was young (*Corrections* 173).

This sense of the waning significance of family is by no means an idiosyncrasy of Franzen's. Gary's worries about family in the age of late capitalism are voiced also by Fisher,



who connects this sensation to the “no long term” attitude of capitalist realism, while also underlining the contradictions that arise from it:

The values that family life depends upon – obligation, trustworthiness, commitment – are precisely those which are held to be obsolete in the new capitalism. Yet, with the public sphere under attack and the safety nets that a ‘Nanny State’ used to provide being dismantled, the family becomes an increasingly important place of respite from the pressures of a world in which instability is a constant (32-3).

The depiction of signs of decline within an institution so crucially important to the middle class as the nuclear family appear as nothing but intentional commentary by Franzen: this is the expression, quite clearly, of an alarming difficulty in the reproduction of a social structure vital to the reproduction of the class that shaped and institutionalized it in the first place.

### **Dysphoria, loss of self-confidence, and fear-fueled class hatred**

One of *The Corrections*’ most visible rhetorical strategies is the tragic-comic representation of its characters. This is true more or less for all them, but particularly for Enid and Alfred’s two sons, Chip and Gary. As I argued above, it would be wrong to think of *The Corrections* as a whole as an allegory, but it would also equally wrong to disregard completely the *allegorical functions* that its main characters take repeatedly throughout the book. Chip and Gary – who are in their mid- to late thirties in the novel, and therefore were born sometime around the 1960s – are occasionally ‘used’ by Franzen in an allegorical manner. Being often set against their father, they seem to be there to demonstrate how much the middle class has changed during the second half of the 20th century. A similar thing may ideally be said to be at work also

in relation to Denise, but the subplot of the novel investigating the past and present of this character seems to deal more with aspects of gender and sexuality, as well as ultimately providing an explanation for Alfred's irrational behavior (in financial terms) in retiring from his position at Orfic Midland. Thus, rather disappointingly, Denise is eventually revealed to be a quasi-secondary character who seems to serve as its main purpose that of 'supporting' Alfred's storyline. This is of course not to say that Denise is employed *solely* as a 'plot-device' to reveal the motivations of other characters, but it is rather evident that her own storyline is somewhat of secondary importance to that of her brothers and, even more, of her parents.

But back to Chip and Gary. These two men, Franzen implies, represent two radically different but also somewhat tragically similar ways in which the modern middle class dialectically confronts the identity crisis that it is forced to live.

The more noticeably problematic one (and therefore also the most comic) is of course Chip. The first chapter after the introductory pages about the St. Jude house is indeed all about the Lamberts' second born, and it bears a rather self-explanatory title: "The Failure." Generally speaking, Chip shouldn't be considered a failure: after all, he was a critical theory professor in a New York university. Yes, he was involved in a scandalous affair with one of his students that led to his being fired, and at the beginning of the novel he is an angry, penniless man who has also just been left by the beautiful Julia Vrais. But in general terms, Chip is not a failure: his profession is in line with a set of 'standard aspirations' for the middle class. In other words: he may have not climbed the social ladder in becoming a university professor, but he certainly did not even fall back into a distinctively working-class position. He still retains *the privilege of intellectual work*, and that excludes him from the conventional definition of a failure. The problem is, he evidently feels like one.

Chip is in fact a perfect representative of that which Ventura calls the impoverished class: a large group of (mostly young) individuals who grew up in middle class families expecting a certain endless professional and economic progress that, today, the system is no more able to guarantee to everyone. The condition of the impoverished class has very little if nothing to do with absolute material affluence: as Ventura puts it, “what is disturbing for the impoverished class is not the scarcity of industrial goods, but rather the structural scarcity of positional goods which guarantee social recognition” (68). In other words, Chip’s sensation of being a complete failure is not related to his economic condition in absolute terms, but rather on his impossibility of fulfilling the professional ‘destiny’ he has set out for himself (with the help of the “rhetoric of ‘becoming who you are’” characteristic of late capitalism) (Ventura 44). The impossibility of this fulfillment is moreover a structural impossibility, because it is logically impossible to allow every single individual to acquire a position of relative privilege over most (if not all) of the others participating. Therefore, Chip is pushed into a contradictory position, typical of the eroded middle class: that of being forced to live as a worker after having been raised as a privileged bourgeoisie.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this contradiction is how the members of the impoverished class, in the desperate attempt to escape the threat of having to renounce their self-constructed privileged identities, end up creating the very conditions for their exploitation. Borrowing from Fisher: “Pay for your own exploitation, the logic insists,” and Franzen makes this clear through the subplot of Chip’s screenplay (26). The situation is the following: after having been fired, Chip decides to both take revenge on the academic community that rejected him and to finally obtain the success and recognition he feels to deserve by writing a screenplay called “The Academic Purple.” The script – a sort of revenge fantasy fulfillment that clearly

hints at the events and the characters involved in the affair with his student – is undoubtedly a display of philosophical and literary sophistication, but it is clearly unsuitable to become an actual film. Chip goes to ridiculous extremes to try to sell it to a wealthy producer, but he (a truly privileged one) flirts with the idea without ever taking the decisive step that would grant Chip the positional good necessary to solve his crisis of confidence. The with Chip's strategy is that the efforts required to first write and then sell the script are extremely expensive, and thus establish a cycle of impoverishment directed at a distant and perhaps unreachable possibility of 'making it:' that is, a cycle of self-exploitation.

Observing a situation like this from a distance, the immediate and logical solution would be of course for Chip to get a stable, less ambitious, more working-class job. But the problem with this kind of reasoning, Ventura warns, is that it does not take into account the fundamental role that positional goods play in the construction of middle class identity. For Chip, renouncing the idea of being destined to be privileged, would mean to renounce to his identity, to what he is *essentially* feels to be. Franzen informs the reader that when he was a kid, Chip had developed “a crush on the buttery alkali metals that his father kept immersed in kerosene ... and had put together his own junior lab in the shadow of his dad's,” and therefore could have potentially pursued a more stable but less prestigious career in science (*Corrections* 35). But Chip's tragedy is all in the lack of prestige in those alkali metals. To use Ventura's words:

In conclusion, we could say that for the impoverished class there is a possibility of taking *rational* decisions, but such rational decisions are in conflict with a series of values, expectations, habits, and codes that define the very identity of its members. The price of a rational decision, then, becomes the biggest of sacrifices: the sacrifice of one's self, or at least of one's self-representation (119).

Moving on to Gary, the older brother's condition seems to be completely opposite to that of Chip. Gary is a rather successful family man: he is moderately wealthy, he is married, and he has three kids. Everything in his life would be perfect, if it wasn't for his wife's Caroline silent feud with Enid and for his increasingly unequivocal signs of chronic depression. Regardless of how different Gary may seem from Chip, I intend to argue that the two in fact suffer from the same kind of dysphoric anxiety in relation to their social status. In other words, Gary too is a member of the impoverished class: he just expresses his distress in ways that relate to his specific conditions.

In *Social Limits to Growth*, published in 1976, Fred Hirsch had anticipated Robert Frank and Ventura's analyses of the problems of allocating positional goods by writing that "neoliberalism is a victim of its own propaganda: when spread to society as a whole, it [ends] up generating demands that are impossible to satisfy" (qtd. in Ventura 25). The impossibility of guaranteeing relative privilege to everyone is, as I demonstrated above, the central contradiction of the eroded middle class, and Gary demonstrates to grasp somewhat lucidly the problem during the panel about Correcktail at Axon corporation's:

Gary wanted to enjoy being a man of wealth and leisure, but the country was making it none too easy. All around him, millions of newly minted American millionaires were engaged in the identical pursuit of feeling extraordinary. ... And meanwhile the sad truth was that not everyone could be extraordinary, not everyone could be extremely cool; because whom would this leave to be ordinary? Who would perform the thankless work of being comparatively *uncool*? (*Corrections* 206).

The extent to which that of relative exceptionality is the pervasive dilemma of the contemporary middle class is noticeable also by how present it is in popular culture. In a scene from the 2004 Pixar film *The Incredibles*, Bob and Helen – the two middle-class parents who also happen to be superheroes (and therefore *objectively* exceptional individuals) – have an argument about Bob’s lack of enthusiasm in attending their son’s ‘graduation’ from fourth into fifth grade. “It’s not a graduation,” Mr. Incredible says, “It’s moving from the fourth grade to the fifth grade. ... it’s psychotic! they keep creating new ways to celebrate mediocrity, but if someone is genuinely exceptional...”. At this point Bob is interrupted by his wife and therefore he is prevented from finishing his sentence. But one can imagine what kind of conclusion he would have reached. Most probably, one similar to that of Gary Lambert and of Ventura: a society in which everyone is made to believe he or she is or *can be* exceptional is, after all, a society in which everyone is ordinary, because exceptionality (here to be intended also as ‘success’) is a *structurally scarce* good. One is always exceptional in relation to someone else’s ordinariness, therefore exceptionality is a radically relativistic concept.

Thus, despite being in absolute terms a privileged individual, Gary shares with Chip (and in fact with the whole Lambert family) the tragedy of today’s middle class: the unavoidable, terrifying precarity of diffused exceptionalism; the distressing feeling of being too rich to be poor, but too poor to be *truly* rich.

The main thing that differentiates Gary from his brother and the rest of his family is the way in which he reacts to the threat of being pushed back into a lower class. Gary’s reactions are influenced by the status of objective wealth in which he finds himself, which lead him to generate as defense mechanism that which Oliver James defines as the “toxins” of the selfish capitalist:

the systematic encouragement of the ideas that material affluence is the key to fulfillment, that only the affluent are winners and that access to the top is open to anyone willing to work hard enough (qtd. in Fisher 36).

This is the explanation for the intense and at times excessive class hatred that Gary expresses at various moments throughout the novel, especially (and not surprisingly) in relation to the Kansan lower-middle class from which he originally comes from. Therefore Franzen accords his readers access to thoughts infused with an anxiety for social recognition whose explanation is precisely that sense of Damoclean threat looming above the heads of contemporary middle class:

What Gary hated most about the Midwest was how unhampered and unprivileged he felt in it. St. Jude in its optimistic egalitarianism consistently failed to accord him the respect to which his gifts and attainments entitled him (*Corrections* 186).

Gary's contempt for this "dumber, sadder, fatter, more resignedly suffering ... Diseased underclass" is thus in some ways comparable to the anger that drives Chip in writing "The Academic Purple:" a 'rage-reflex' aimed at protecting one's social identity in the face of an economic reality that triggers a fratricidal competition in a class that is shrinking and being progressively eroded (*Corrections* 511).

### **The older generation: mental health and a lost world**

In a passage from the chapter focusing on Gary, Franzen allows the Lamberts' firstborn to express his resentment for his origins, and particularly for his father:

His parents were cowed by authority of all kinds. When Gary wanted to reassure himself that he'd escaped their fate, when he needed to measure his distance from

St. Jude, he considered his own fearlessness in the face of authority—including the authority of his father (*Corrections* 157).

I have observed above how feelings like these are somehow connected to wider issues of class and economics. Let me now consider the aspects of *generational conflict* (or perhaps rather *discontinuity*) implied in Gary's 'displacement' of his Kansan middle class origins, particularly as they relate to the character of Alfred.

As I suggested above, Alfred and his two male sons represent two different 'forms' of the modern middle class man: if the two children stand for the younger, 'eroded' one, Alfred certainly identifies with a certain old-school, 'baby-boomer' mentality. As Franzen highlights at various times throughout the book, Alfred Lambert is a hard-working, tough-loving man who, in a somewhat exquisitely American fashion, prides himself on sticking to the concreteness of reality. When in a flashback scene Enid suggests to buy a stock of Pacific Midland – which as an insider Alfred knows will rapidly increase in value in the following months – he categorically refuses, replying to his wife in full-on macho style that “the stock market [is] a lot of dangerous nonsense ... [and that] he [remembers] Black Tuesday as if it were yesterday” (*Corrections* 256). Later in the novel it will be revealed that Alfred's strict ethics towards Pacific Midland is mainly fueled by his discovery of the secret affair between the adolescent Denise and his employee Don Armour, but what is important here is in fact solely Alfred's approach to reality. Alfred, in perfect American-style baby-boomer mentality, perceives himself as “an individual from an age of individuals,” a firm believer of the American dream myth and of the rigid work and moral ethics attached to it (*Corrections* 488). And indeed, he has good reason to do so: Alfred character is constructed in this way because, Franzen suggests, those who grew up during the Great Depression and became adults while the US (and shortly after all the West) were setting in



motion the engines of the glorious years of post-war economic expansion learned to deal with reality in a way consistent with the characteristics of that era. The problem is that, at a certain point after the 1970s, the characteristics of the era started to change drastically, without Alfred's mindset keeping up with the change.

To be fair, on the level of the character's history, the roots of Alfred's mental illnesses are visible from very early on. In another flashback scene, Franzen shows Alfred alone in a motel room during a business trip and overwhelmed by his anxieties:

The suspicion that everything was relative. That the "real" and "authentic" might not be simply doomed but fictive to begin with. That his feeling of righteousness, of uniquely championing the real, was just a feeling. These were the suspicions that had lain in ambush in all those motel rooms. These were the deep terrors beneath the flimsy beds (*Corrections* 289).

Glossing over the implausibility of Alfred thinking with the vocabulary of a post-structuralist theorist, this scene is important because it offers a glimpse into the troubled mind that will later develop an extremely problematic form of Alzheimer's. Although mental health is a particularly visible issue in every single one of the Lamberts – I hinted at Gary and Chip's conditions, but also Enid and Denise suffer from significant mental distress – Alfred is certainly the character through which Franzen explores the theme more thoroughly. If one assumes, as I do here, that a large portion of Alfred's distress has to do with the consequences of historical, political, and socio-economic processes, then it becomes possible to connect it with what Fisher writes about mental health in connection to his concept of Capitalist Realism.

In a rather unoriginal way, Fisher claims that the "mental health plague" in capitalist societies" is strictly related to the modes of production and consumption of late capitalism (19).

A little more interesting is Fisher's emphasis on the tendency of "privatizing" such problems as a form of denial of "any question of social systemic causation" (21). However, what is by far most relevant in regards to Alfred's character is Fisher's claim that the "conditions of ontological precarity" of neoliberal capitalism induce "forgetting [as] an adaptive strategy" (56). In this sense, Alzheimer's disease can be read as Alfred's extreme coping mechanism in the face of the traumatic changes of paradigms imposed on him by history. His crises, his general dysfunctionality, and perhaps even some of his reactionary ideas then become also the symptoms of a collective pathology: the slow, almost imperceptible but inexorable erosion – the *correction* – of the middle class that desperately fights to survive. But as also Jonathan Franzen knows, "the middle ... is disappearing" (*The End of the End* 74).

### 3. After the catastrophe: *NW* by Zadie Smith

*Here's what Michel likes to say: not everyone can be invited to the party. Not this century* (Smith 3).

The second novel analyzed in this thesis allows me to discuss the post-Recession era of austerity and economic stagnation. Published in 2012 – some eleven years after Franzen's *The Corrections* – *NW* by Zadie Smith is a work that can no longer just foreshadow the crisis of the middle class: in dealing with the conditions of the not blatantly poor but neither wealthy residents of the North-West side of London, Smith describes what David Marcus has aptly defined as “the social and psychological disorders of postmodern—that is, post-welfare state—capitalism” (70).

Reading *NW* right after *The Corrections*, one senses strongly that much has changed in the Western middle class, or at least in its representation. Those that seemed only pessimistic predictions or extra-ordinary cases at the beginning of the century have now – after the catastrophic market crash of 2008 – revealed themselves as grim inescapable realities. In these eleven years, Western culture has passed from the somewhat utopistic euphoria of early 2000s prosperity to the ubiquitous anxiety of what Martin Amis perceptively termed “the age of horrorism”—and particularly so in regards to the representation of the middle class (qtd. Marcus 68). In other words, one might say that the mood of the era has drastically changed. These are no longer the years of endless economic progress in which it is “nearly impossible not to make money” (*Corrections* 108). Or rather, if they still are, they have now started to show, as a staff

writer as *The Atlantic* recently suggested in writing about the 2010s, “how bad everything [can] feel when everything [is] going great” (Lowrey). With Zadie Smith’s *NW*, I begin discussing the era or relative wealth and positional goods, or, as Smith quotes from Nietzsche, “*the age of comparison*” (Smith 197; emphasis is mine). With *NW*, I begin discussing the terrible long decade of middle class erosion.

The other important distinction that must be made between Franzen and Smith’s novel is of course geographical. Having been raised in the same North-West area of London where the novel is set, Smith is naturally more interested in writing about the social issues of the United Kingdom. This makes her social critique – and the perspective from which I analyze it – slightly different from that of Franzen. As I argued above, the US and the UK are countries that to a certain extent can be compared in terms of their social and economic trajectories in the past forty years. But only *to a certain extent*. The long and precocious history of British welfarism and social security is in this sense a very important instance of the substantial differences between these two countries. This is then also the reason why Fischer can talk of John Ball’s epigraph at the beginning of *NW* as an allusion to “the destructive distance contemporary society, with its staggering inequalities, has traveled from an ... egalitarian past” (25). Ball’s verses from his sermon on equality – “When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who was then the gentleman?” – are re-contextualized in the present of contemporary Britain, in which the egalitarian past of which Fischer writes about is of course not Adam and Eve’s period in the garden of Eden, but rather the

3 The phrase appears in *Human, All Too Human* as the title of one of Nietzsche’s aphoristic paragraphs. A section of the passage that seems to bear some significance in relation to *NW* and this thesis reads: “The less men are bound by tradition, the greater is the inner activity of motives, the greater, correspondingly, the outer restlessness, the promiscuous flow of humanity, the polyphony of strivings. ... Today the growth of the aesthetic feeling is decided, owing to the great number of [artistic] forms which offer themselves for comparison. The majority— those that are condemned by the method of comparison— will be allowed to die out” (Nietzsche 33-4).

Eden-like experience (or at least so perceived) of an expansive welfare state<sup>4</sup>. In discussing the content of Smith's book, therefore, it is important to keep in mind that she describes a society that (unlike the American one) has experienced the trauma of post-neoliberal decades also, if not primarily, as a progressive dismantling of the Keynesian welfare state. In other words, the main difference to keep in mind is that while the US never really had a welfare state, the United Kingdom did, but eventually lost it. This feeling of loss – this *banishment from Eden* – informs substantially the tone and the content of *NW*.

Zadie Smith puts together a work that evidently aims to interpret collective experience. Under her occasionally confusing formal experiments, Smith displays a similar interest with the social as Franzen. Thus, *NW* is a book crammed with objects and people – a novel perhaps resembling a panel by Hieronymus Bosch – that seems to be concerned more with the depiction of a general, collective scene than with specific character storylines. The latter are obviously present, but Smith's choice to divide the book into four sections, each following a specific character (plus a final epilogue), is a strong enough statement of her commitment to the narration of the collective over the individual. *NW* is a novel that treats with the same affection its protagonists, its minor characters, but also the roads of Willesden, which from being “well-appointed country living for those tired of the city” became “disappointed city living for those tired of their countries” (Smith 47). It is a novel populated with things and with people who, just like Tom Mercer – the white *petit bourgeois* kid that sells a decrepit car to one of the four main characters, Felix – suffer from “some varietal of twenty-first-century intellectual ennui that [makes] it impossible ... to take advantage of the good fortune [they had] been born with” (Smith 132).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, the verses also (and perhaps primarily) bear an egalitarian meaning in terms of gender.

Commenting on all the major and minor details that Smith places in *NW* would require far more space than what I am allowed in this thesis. Therefore, I will only concentrate on the two major characters in the book, Leah and Natalie, in the attempt to once again read in them the symptoms of the crisis of the middle class.

### **Leah: the epitome of the impoverished middle class**

To a certain extent, Leah is a kind of character I have already analyzed in this thesis. Leah Hanwell – a thirty-something woman of Irish descent – is a lower-middle class individual struggling with the difficult post-2008 economic conditions at the periphery of the metropolis. She is definitely not wealthy, but she perceives her objectively privileged status as it compares to that of the poor who surround her in Willesden. Moreover, Smith makes her readers aware that, after all, Leah's socio-economic status is a significant improvement from that of her parents. During one of her visits to her apartment, Pauline (Leah's mother) shares memories of Mr. Hanwell that casts a light on the family's economic history: "That was your father – God rest him – he didn't want you to grow up feeling poor, even though we *were* poor" (Smith 75). The problem – once again one that can be read as the entire middle class's problem – is that Leah's objective economic progress was not enough to compensate the global economic forces that triggered a widespread *relative* impoverishment in the more fragile sections of the middle class. In other words, Leah's paradoxical class dysphoria is the curse of Ventura's impoverished class all over again: the curse of a class not rich enough to feel rich, and yet not poor enough to feel poor.

Such a feeling of dysphoria is set against, counterbalanced and therefore highlighted by the ideological slogans tossed at Leah from the start of the novel. In the very first page of the

book, Leah hears on the radio a catch phrase that, in some way, echoes throughout the whole section of the novel dedicated to her: “I am the sole author of the dictionary of my life” (3). This slogan perfectly encapsulates that “rhetoric of ‘becoming who you are’” which I mentioned above and which Ventura identifies as one of the foundations of late capitalism (44). For the remainder of the section of the novel focused on her, Leah continuously attempts to negotiate this desire of self-determination with the material obstacles that her reality imposes on her, ultimately leaving readers with the certainty that Smith constructs her characters with the aim of demonstrating that, despite the dominant ideology of personal liberty, they are most of the times “shaped ... by the socioeconomic circumstances into which they were born” (Fischer 25).

The socio-economic position of Leah is further complicated when analyzed in relation to her husband, Michel. Michel is a Frenchman of Algerian descent, with a history of denied opportunities and (most probably) of racial discrimination back in France. As he tells directly to Leah:

From the first day I was stepping into this country [the UK] I have my head on correctly; I was very clear: I am going up the ladder, one rung at least. In France, you're African, you're Algerian, who wants to know? There's no opportunity, you can't move! Here, you can move. You still have to work! (Smith 29).

Through the character of Michel, Smith seems to be voicing a sort of modern myth about social mobility in Britain and in the US in contrast with the perceived economic austerity and stagnation in continental Europe. In acknowledging the existence of this myth of Anglo-Saxon ‘opportunities,’ Smith clearly seems to be pointing to the *fictionality* of such a belief: as each of her main characters shows, that of ‘easy social mobility’ in Britain is *only* a myth, and has no factual correspondence in the vast majority of cases. It is particularly interesting, however, to

observe what becomes of Michel and his British opportunities in the novel. Readers meet Michel at an indefinite moment after his marriage to Leah, and aside from dinners and conversations about having a baby with her, Michel's main occupation seems to be reckless trading investments using Leah's eight-thousand pound inheritance from her late father:

In the box room the computer plays angry hip hop, a sign that things are going badly. Sometimes she says to him: have you lost it? He becomes furious, he says it doesn't work that way. Some days I lose, some days I win. How can he be losing or winning that same eight thousand pounds, over and over? Leah's only inheritance from Hanwell, their only savings (Smith 49).

What happened to his idea of climbing the social ladder? What about Michel's 'British dream'? The answer is, I believe, rather simple: these opportunities have never been there in the first place. Or, even worse, there were just *not enough of them* around.

Michel is thus another one in the list of members of the impoverished class in Smith's novel. However, what makes his kind of private tragedy particularly interesting is precisely his adventurous trading on the financial market. This detail – which Smith uses as a way of informing the reader of the failure of Michel's dreams about moving to Britain – also makes Leah's husband very similar to what Ventura defines an 'unproductive worker.' Quoting Paul Mattick, Ventura identifies the "hypertrophic growth of unproductive labor" with a crisis of capitalism, that employs this army of 'wasters' as the last resource against the threat of overproduction (64). Following this line of thought, Ventura concludes that his impoverished class is nothing but "the human residual left by overproduction crises in the moment in which unproductive consumption cannot be financed any longer," which is another way to say that de-



regulated Capital tends to consume social status and aspirations of the more fragile in moments in which it becomes increasingly difficult to consume its products (Ibidem).

One last thing about Leah: the first section of *NW*, dedicated to her, is named “visitation.” For a few pages, this title seems strangely religious and frankly out of place, until Leah is effectively visited by someone. Leah’s ‘visitation’ – Shar, a woman roughly her age, who recognizes Leah as one her classmates back in school – is anything but a pleasant one: after convincing Leah to let her in, Shar snatches some money from her without ever returning it. Leah will later encounter Shar a couple of times in the streets of Willesden, and will become convinced that Shar is an addict. The important fact to register in these events is, I believe, the fact Shar is represented as being considerably worse-off than Leah. She is, to be concise, *truly* poor. And yet, hers is a ‘visitation’ to Leah. What does this mean? What kind of visitation is that of Shar?

The answer is to be found again on the level of social status and its perception by characters. If one accepts to see Leah as a member of the eroded middle class and Shar as one of the “poor of the city,” Shar’s visitation becomes a visitation from the threat of social ‘downgrading:’ it is a vision of what Leah is afraid to become; an encounter with the social reality around her that activates the fear of being pushed back into working class poverty (Smith 23). This impression is further reinforced in the last chapter of this section, in which Leah goes to a pharmacy to collect a few photographs she wanted to develop. Upon receiving the photographs, she realizes that there has been mistake, as she has been mysteriously given pictures of Shar. As Fischer points out, this apparently innocuous mix-up is used by Smith to signal that Shar is “an alternative version of herself [Leah]—the version that didn’t get away from poverty and is still struggling to get by” (25). She is, one may say, a displacement of Leah’s

unconscious terror that “the liberties of the market ... are in fact working against us,” making us less ‘the authors of our lives’ than those who are *authored* by the invisible and yet pervasive forces of society and capital (Marcus 70).

### **Natalie: dysphoria in disguise and education as a rigged system**

In the first pages of *NW*'s section dedicated to Natalie (formerly Keisha) Blake, Smith provides her readers with an insight of the socio-economic origins of both Natalie and her childhood friend Leah:

Mrs Hanwell was a general nurse at the Royal Free Hospital and Mrs Blake a health visitor affiliated with St. Mary's, Paddington. Neither woman was in any sense a member of the bourgeoisie but neither did they consider themselves solidly of the working class either. (177)

This paragraph is line with what I argued about Leah: specifically, that Smith focuses on the lower end of the British middle class, that is with that stratum of society that can neither be considered working-class nor solidly *bourgeoise*. However, thing may seem too get more complex if I am to claim that Natalie, too, is part of the impoverished class. In this sense, Natalie might resemble Gary Lambert in *The Corrections*. Like Gary, Natalie too appears to be a blatantly successful individual: coming from her Willesden lower-middle class family, she married a wealthy and fascinating Anglo-Italian man, she had a couple of kids, and became a barrister. She certainly has no problems with money or any failed aspirations. And yet Natalie too, like Gary, is hugely dissatisfied. Unlike the Lamberts' firstborn, though, Natalie Blake does not express her distress ‘publicly’ through rage fits or anti-social behavior: her misery is primarily channeled into sexual frustration, which she attempts to ‘fix’ by arranging adulterous

sexual encounters on the internet. Natalie is thus another character who disguises a feeling of dysphoria that seems to have no direct correlative with her actual social and economic condition. How can this be explained in the context of Smith's book?

Natalie's main problem seems to be the feeling of being out of place. Her section of the novel, titled 'host,' is filled with scenes in which Smith – either from the inside or the outside of her character – points to the disharmony between Natalie and her social status. Take, for instance, the argument that she has with her husband over the problems of Natalie's family. Frank uses a line of argument that emphasizes (perhaps even to the point of caricature) his upper-middle class mentality: “Cheryl [Natalie's sister] could stop having children. Your brother could get a job. They could leave that money-grabbing cult. Your family make poor life choices – that's just a fact” (Smith 228). Smith then immediately comments on this by underlining the original class difference between the two:

It seemed that Natalie and Francesco De Angelis had opposite understandings of this word 'choice'. Both believed their own interpretation to be objectively considered and in no way the product of their contrasting upbringings (228-9).

The same 'antagonistic' view of class difference is shortly after emphasized also on the side of Natalie's family who tells her through the words of an unnamed relative that she is “joining the ... Enemy camp” (Smith 231).

Seen from this perspective, Natalie's class angst might seem banal and unoriginal. However, things start to become more interesting when one considers also the aspects of work aspirations and education. Natalie first meets Frank at university, in the midst of her law studies. Smith makes evident the fact that a relationship with a man of wealth who takes care of her provides great security to Natalie, who is now able to concentrate on her studies without having

to worry too much about getting by. Natalie's discomfort, then, appears to be the product of her awareness of this 'help' she received. To put it another way: Natalie knows perfectly that if she had not met Frank she probably would have had to abandon her studies. It is I dare say obvious that there would be much to say about Natalie's marriage to Frank from a feminist perspective: can Natalie's 'leap' into upper-middle class be considered a personal achievement, or should it be seen only as a 'concession' (which really conceals a *transaction*) made by a structurally privileged wealthy male? The latter is, I believe, rather probable. However, to open up a discussion about gender – despite the importance of such a discussion – would mean deviate from the principal aim of this thesis, which focuses specifically on socio-economic aspects of the novel. Therefore, I must limit myself to say that in the awareness that Frank (as upper-middle class individual) is the reason behind her social mobility lies both Natalie's dysphoria and Smith's sharp critique of the education system.

In *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Piketty voices what is usually the general consensus on education by affirming that the major "convergence factor" in reducing economic inequality is "the distribution of knowledge" (46). The claim is both empirically and statistically valid, particularly because it is evident that the increase in the rate of university-educated individuals achieved after World War II contributed to large increases in salaries and therefore in a considerable reduction of inequalities. And yet, despite the fact that the 'theorem' of mass university education proved efficient in the past, today higher education does not seem to provide the same benefits of the past, or at least *not to the same extent* as it did up until a few decades ago. The reduced effectiveness of education in reducing inequality is voiced, for

<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking, the term 'mass university education' is an hyperbole. True mass university education (that is, somewhere around 75-80%) has never been reached in any Western country. However, the term is used to highlight the incontestable growth in university education during the latter part of the 20th century.

instance, by Ornstein, who affirms that “we have reached the point—the economic divide—where education cannot easily compensate nor overcome economic inequality” (5). A similar perspective is unsurprisingly shared also by Ventura, who argues that

Education is first of all an *effect* of economic growth; only secondarily it is one of its *causes*. ... That is to say, it is not enough to invest in education. We must also ask on what *kind* of education we are investing. And finally, since the correlation [between rates of education and growth] is less and less evident in Western countries, it would be absurd to ignore the concrete possibility that there might be a saturation limit beyond which the cause stops operating, or at least operates less clearly (175-6).

But Ventura goes even further, and affirms that the problem with education is that, today, it works as a mechanism of social selection. “In truth,” he argues, “at every step in the education process there is discrimination on the basis of class, since those who do not have enough resources to go further are progressively excluded” (187). And this is the reason behind Natalie’s troubles: the asphyxiating sense that she is not where she is supposed to be; a sense of *guilt* because (in her mind) what made her a barrister was less her talent than the reliance on Frank’s financial resources. It is, by the way, the same psychological mechanism that brings her to refuse the offer for tenancy by telling herself (and others around her) “a story about legal ethics, strong moral character and indifference to money” (Smith 242).

What ultimately crushes Natalie and forces her to run away from her home and family at the end of the novel is thus the impossibility to reconcile this subtle sense of guilt with her need for financial prosperity and “the distance [it] put between [herself] and Caldwell” [the estate in which Natalie grew up] (Smith 252). In this sense, it is possible to read Natalie as another one of

the victims of the erosion of the middle class. It does not really matter that by the end of the novel she recovers a sense of security by telling Leah that the two friends are better off than other Willesden ex-kids because they “worked harder” and they were “smarter” (Smith 332). Natalie still remains an individual who internally perceives (and suffers from) the very much concrete barriers of a system that inspired her to dream but is ultimately unable to deliver true, meritocratic social mobility. What is then most remarkable about Zadie Smith’s *NW*, is how the novel is capable of expressing the pervasive atmosphere of decline of a class through two characters who outwardly appear to have made significant economic progress (in one case even exceptional) from the conditions in which their parents raised them. It is an apparent paradox even explicitly pointed out by Smith, who leaves it to Pauline to articulate it. Seeing her reflection while talking the street, Leah’s mother formulates a metaphor that is at the core of Smith’s book and, in some way, even of this thesis:

From the street it must look like human perfectibility: each generation improves upon the last. Fitter, healthier, more productive. From the owls rises the phoenix. Or rises only to descend again? Longer and longer until it’s shorter (Smith 43).

It could be argued that for the middle class it is the same thing. From a certain distance, progress is categorically undeniable. But when one looks closer – when one looks at the latest specimen of the class – the trajectory seems one of long, continuously delayed, and yet unstoppable decline. Through her characters – and particularly through Leah and Natalie – Zadie Smith’s *NW* stages the crisis of the contemporary middle class and the threat of erosion with which the more fragile section of this social group are confronted. *NW* does this mostly through a collective, social perspective—that is, attempting to look at the bigger picture. The next novel I analyze

narrates a similar reality (and similarly comments on society as a whole), but this time from the perspective of the individual.

#### 4. Catastrophe continued: *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And*

##### *The Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* by Dave Eggers

—... *If there were an alien invasion tomorrow, and the only way to win against the aliens would be to fully fund Head Start, then sure, we would find that money.*

—*So it's not a matter of possibility, but of will?*

...

—*Of course. Everything is a matter of will.* (Eggers 43)

In the same ways a NW investigated the aftermath of the financial crisis in Britain, Dave Eggers's *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And The Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* also focuses on the condition of the middle class – this time in America – in the 2010s. Eggers's experimental and dialogue-based book was published in 2014, and shares with *NW* an underlying concern about the long-term social consequences of the financial crisis for the middle class. Its protagonist, Thomas, is a young man in his early thirties (therefore roughly the same age of Leah and Natalie in *NW*) who kidnaps seven people more or less closely connected to his past and takes them to an abandoned Army base on the coast of Northern California. There, Thomas interrogates them in order to find answers for the death of his best friend, Don Bahn. Don, a young Vietnamese-American was killed two years earlier in a shooting right outside of his house. As Eggers reveals towards the end of the novel, the exact circumstances of Don's death had been kept mysterious in order to conceal the fact that he had been the victim of an episode of police brutality.



As I mentioned above, *Your Fathers* is set in the US, around the same time as *NW*, and consequently raises issues similar to those of Zadie Smith's book, although in the context of a different socio-economic environment. In regards to this, it is of fundamental importance to remember that, unlike the UK, the United States never had a tradition of welfare: consequently, American cultural and socio-economy discourse lacks entirely the notion of 'losing social security.' Similarly, post-2008 US also lacks concepts of austerity and economic stagnation: thanks to its monetary sovereignty – and being free from financial limitations comparable to those imposed on EU countries by the Fiscal Compact – after the crisis the US government was capable of pumping vast amounts of money in the economy, allowing it to recover relatively soon and embark once again on a period of sustained growth.

And yet, as it has already been shown a number of times in this thesis, general nationwide prosperity no longer constitutes a guarantee for the stability and prosperity of the middle class, especially in its most fragile sections. This is exactly that 'syndrome of the decade' discussed by Annie Lowrey in the *Atlantic* article I mentioned in the previous chapter: the endemic structure of late capitalism, that terrible cognitive dissonance generated by an economy that keeps growing while the buying power of the middle class fails to grow fast enough to compensate for it. As a result, the widespread impression among members of such class is that despite the fact that their absolute wealth increases, the relative (that is, *perceived*) size of economic means is diminishing. In other words: while the GDP grows, the middle class shrinks.

The elephant in the room, the magic variable that makes this strange equivalence work is of course the problem of inequality. As Piketty observes, "the inequality in the global distribution of capital that is observable today is comparable in its extent to that which was observed in European societies around the years 1900-10" (677). That is to say that economic

inequality is rampant today, and this is *especially* true in the USA: as Robert Frank notes, “most of the income gains in the United States during the past several decades have gone to people at the top of the income distribution” (25). Ornestein, too, is conscious of this, and affirms that the growing gaps between the super rich and the rest – that is, most of the middle class plus the other ‘invisibles’ of the Earth – are a serious threat to those “principles of democracy” that constitute “the very foundation of America” (5). This concern is echoed by Piketty too, who criticizes the belief that a booming economy will magically solve all the dialectical issues of a society:

Economic growth alone, unfortunately, is absolutely not capable of satisfying the hope for democracy and meritocracy, which instead has to find its support in specific institutions, and not solely in the forces of technological progress and of the market (154).

Without ever addressing these issues directly, Eggers’s novel certainly deals with the way they affect the social fabric of the US. As Laura Morris puts it, the fiction of Eggers is particularly responsive to “cultural and social change in contemporary American society ... and thus also needs to be analyzed as a catalyst for these developments” (Homborg-Schramm et al. 121). In this context, *You Fathers* is the only novel I analyze here that introduces the problem of how a social and political order can maintain its legitimacy when the promises on which such system is based are systematically unfulfilled. As I will show, this is a novel that once again stages the ‘drama’ of the middle class, but which also sheds a light on the other dark and disturbingly real side of such drama: *Your Fathers* shows the contagious unrest and the growing tension that, if not resolved, risks erupting in manifestations of rage that would threaten the structure and institutions of contemporary democratic societies.

## **A pointless reality**

First of all, the following question needs to be answered: what socio-economic does Thomas, the protagonist of the novel, belong to? Unsurprisingly, he is yet another member of the eroded middle class. He could be considered as a sort of less successful version of Chip Lambert: Thomas is a white young man coming from a middle (but certainly not upper-middle) class enjoying relative stability, but who is thrown into a world that constantly threatens this stability. There is of course also an enormous mental health problem to consider in regards to him: one can accept the fictionality of the book and suspend his disbelief at being told that Thomas brings seven people into an abandoned military base with apparent nonchalance, but it is obvious that the character that Eggers presents to the reader is affected by some kind severe mental condition. After all, it is even made explicit in the first few pages. While talking to Kevin (his first ‘victim’), Thomas reveals the seriousness of his mental distress:

—...I’ve been in a strange place lately. I was getting these migraines, I couldn’t sleep. Holy shit, the pressure! The questions were piling up and were struggling me at night (Eggers 7).

Through the rest of the novel, Eggers reveals that Thomas’s condition is the result of both personal trauma (the disastrous relationship with his mother, the sexual harassment he experienced from his school teacher etc.) and social conditions, thus admitting that his mental condition can be at least partly explained with what Fisher defines the “social systemic causation” of mental health problems (21).

However, the fact that Thomas chooses such a disturbing manner to interrogate his subjects is not the only interesting aspect of his actions. The place he chooses for the interrogations, too, is relevant. As I mentioned above, Eggers’s protagonist brings his seven

prisoners to an abandoned US Army base on the coast of Northern California. This location and the way it connects with subjects discussed in the first part of the book feel far too unusual to just be a secondary detail. In other words, Eggers is evidently saying something with this base. Indeed, the abandoned complex of warehouses seems to work as a powerful symbol both for the lack of purpose and grand objectives that Thomas laments in modern America and for the condition of Thomas himself as an individual in society. The base is a rather evident material expression of the US's abdication of the role of leading of technological leader and *civilizing* power. It is, so to speak, an objective correlative to the decommissioning of the Shuttle and the loss of interest in space exploration of the US after the end of the Cold War. As for the latter, the base and Thomas are essentially the same: both born of a world that no longer exists; an object from a different era that has little if any place in the new one.

In the two interrogations most relevant to this thesis – the first two, the one to Kevin the astronaut and to Congressman Dickinson – Thomas articulates his anxieties towards contemporary America and his socio-economic conditions through two main claims. The first one is that contemporary society lacks a sense of purpose, a direction. This is what Thomas tells the Congressman when he asks about the reasons behind his decision to kidnap people to interrogate them:

—... What exactly brought you to this point?

—I don't know. Actually, I think I do know. It's because nothing's happened to me. And I think that's a waste on your part. You should have found some kind of purpose for me (Eggers 37).

Therefore, Thomas (and metaphorically speaking, the contemporary middle class as a whole) struggles with a sense of the 'end of history:' he sees himself trapped in a present devoid

of a vision of the future; a world that, as Congressman Dickinson notes too, is “already built” (Eggers 210). This is also what Thomas means when he laments the US government decision to stop sending astronauts on Shuttles to the moon: abandoning the ‘epic’ of space exploration means rejecting a linear narrative of progress and triumph for a stagnant, infinite present that looks more like slow decadence than stability.

But the symbol of the decommissioning of the Space Shuttle serves also the second of Thomas’s claims. This second anxiety of his is perhaps less philosophical and more directly related to the material conditions of the middle class. In fact, it is once again the central preoccupation of Ventura’s impoverished class: the breaking of the promise of future success. This is what Thomas tells Kevin, his classmate from college who became an astronaut a year before the decommissioning of the Shuttle:

—... You know how rarely a promise is kept? A kept promise is like a white whale, man! But when you became an astronaut you kept a promise, a big fucking promise, and I felt like from there any promise could be kept. That all promises could be kept—should be kept. ... But then they pulled the Shuttle from you. And I thought, Ah, there it is again. The bait and switch. The inevitable collapse of anything seeming solid. The breaking of every last goddamned promise on Earth (Eggers 14-5).

It is rather clear that here Eggers uses the example of Kevin to make a point about the illusion of social mobility in American society. It certainly isn’t the first time that a writer makes a critique of the American Dream, but that of Eggers seems to be directed less at the myth in itself than at its specific crisis in the 21st century, especially for those of lower-middle class origins. Eggers seems to say: the American Dream was never real, but at least before the US

could construct a believable illusion of its existence; the financial crisis and the subsequent impoverishment and destabilization of millions of lower-middle class individuals ultimately proved that the myths of social mobility and of the self-made man are little more than *fiction*. In this sense, Kevin's story as it is related by Eggers is quite 'exceptional' in order to make sense as a typical case: after all, not everybody can or has the abilities to become an astronaut. It is Thomas' story, instead, that constitutes an important, typical case. As he tells Congressman Dickinson, Thomas experienced a dysphoric (but very common) work reality after finishing college:

—My uncle made me work in his factory. Can you imagine that? I had a college degree and he made me work on the floor, next to a bunch of Eastern European women. How fucked up is that? (Eggers 21)

Leaving aside the racism and the anger voiced by Thomas (as well as the fact that his employer was one of his relatives), what this line seems to hint at is the problem faced by that which Guy Standing defines the 'precariat.' One of the "defining features" of this class – which can be seen as a subset of Ventura's impoverished class – is a form of "relative deprivation, a sense of status frustration," since the members of this class "are not doing what they set out to do, and there is little prospect of doing so" (Standing 30). This status frustration encapsulates the absurd condition of the modern middle class, especially in its younger 'members.' It is the absurdity of telling "a generation or two that the finish line is here, that the requirements to get there are this and this and this, but then, just as [it gets] there, [to] move the finish line" (Eggers 34). It is the fatal error hidden between the lines of the slogans of late capitalism ('become who you are!'), and a problem eventually admitted even by the Congressman himself:

—Thomas, nothing you say is unprecedented. There are others like you. Millions of men like you. Some women, too. And I think this is a result of you being prepared for a life that does not exist. You were built for a different world. Like a predator without prey (Eggers 46).

Eggers seems to imply that if even a baby-boomer like the Congressman – a man who fought in Vietnam, infused with all the rhetoric and the values of post-war America – is willing to concede on the absurdity of the condition of Thomas and millions of others like him, then the problem must be real.

It is worth noting how Thomas seems to resemble the Army base to which he brought his hostages: both the military facility and the young man are products built for a different world. I say ‘product’ because a way to read the status frustration of Thomas is to imagine him as an object produced to extract a certain amount of profit from a market (in this case, the *job* market). Drawing from David Ricardo’s ideas on the implementation of industrial machinery and on Marx’s theory of the tendency of rate of profit to fall, Ventura suggests an intriguing analogy between the logic of capital and the growing status frustration of today’s middle class. The theory is the following: the more machinery is systematically employed in the production of a certain good, the lower the price of that good will be on the market, thus getting closer – little by little – to the cost of production. It follows logically that the more the trend continues, the smaller the rate of profit will be for each single product sold. But the logic of capitalism cannot accept drastic cuts on the share of profit, and therefore reacts by either lowering costs or by pushing more vulnerable competitors out of the market. And this is precisely the tragic fate of the impoverished class: to be a beautiful, magnificently constructed product that – alas! – was manufactured for a job market that does not exist anymore. Its members are like a wonderful

movie printed on a 35mm celluloid film: a beautiful but useless product, an analog technical wonder that has no place in a world dominated by the digital. In other words, members of the impoverished class like Thomas were raised to be successful for a socio-economic environment that never came to be; they are products devised for a market that does not exist anymore, a product as useful as a VHS produced for people who don't even have a VHS recorder at home anymore. What ultimately drives Thomas's desperate actions is the awareness that he and his fellow members of the precariat "were not prepared for this harsh life, but for another, wonderful one. The problem is that this other life does not exist" (Ventura 7).

### **A spectre is haunting democracy**

In *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher writes of rebellion and rage towards the regime of capitalism as

Anger [that] can only be a matter of venting; it is aggression in a vacuum, directed at someone who is a fellow victim of the system but with whom there is no possibility of communality. Just as the anger has no proper object, it will have no effect (64).

Now, Thomas's anger – both his kidnappings and the arson of the hospital to which his friend Don was taken after the shooting – is certainly directed to fellow victims (Kevin, the mutilated Congressman, even his own mother...) and it does not seem to have a specific object nor a particular *programmatic* reason. In fact, one could read *Your Fathers* itself as a long, two-hundred page rant in the middle of a quasi-vacuum (the military base) by Thomas. And in some way, his anger *has* no effect. But the fact that Fisher sees late capitalism as a sort of unbreakable cage that is not threatened by rage directed more or less directly at it does not mean that that rage



may prove ineffectual *in toto*. In fact, if really it is more difficult to imagine the end of capitalism than the end of the world, as Fisher argues, then it is also possible to imagine that anger against it might propel an easier and perhaps far scarier end of something else: democracy.

This claim is intentionally a little exaggerated, as in no way Eggers explicitly addresses threats to the architecture of democracy in relation to Thomas's deeds. But it is impossible to deny that in his book there *is* a sense of a latent violence lurking beneath the surface. It is a violence driven by anger at the tragic reality of a society that sends contradictory messages and punishes the most fragile individuals. As Thomas puts it, "the price of being confused in this world is seventeen bullets in your own backyard" (Eggers 184). Eggers seems to be asking himself and his readers: if this system can brutally kill a young man in the name of the law and drive another one to commit multiple kidnapping, how long will it be before a spiral of uncontrollable violence is set in motion? This is not to say that Eggers justifies the actions of his protagonist or suggests that Thomas is in the right in kidnapping and interrogating his victims: the absurdity and the violence of his actions is never called into question. Rather, he seems to be warning against the psychological threats posed by a system that is evidently not working for a large section of the American population. Yes, Eggers suggests, Thomas is definitely a particularly fragile individual, but the socio-economic and political structure in which he lives does not provide any kind of substantial help that may contribute resolve the tensions which itself generates.

As Ventura argues, "in order to make a man miserable ... it is necessary to educate him to a lifestyle he cannot afford: misery will increase his resentment towards the society that is unable to provide for needs that have become absolutely necessary" (8). Therefore, Eggers implies Thomas's condition is a latent threat to the stability of democratic societies. In other

words, the ‘production’ of an impoverished class generates the potential for anger and possibly even of violence in those who have been ‘betrayed’ by the system: this sense of betrayal should not be intended as a form of entitlement, but rather as the resentment generated by the fact that the pact at the base of modern democratic societies – the promise of equal opportunities, of meritocracy – has been broken. And Thomas and of course Eggers are evidently aware of this:

—Don’t you think that the vast majority of the chaos in the world is caused by a relatively small group of disappointed men? ... The men who haven’t gotten the work they expected to get. The men who don’t get the promotion they expected. ... These men can’t be left to mix with the rest of society. Something bad always happens (Eggers 43-4).

However, not everything is lost. There is still hope, both for the impoverished class and for democracy. That hope, Eggers suggests, is in the possibility of making these people see themselves again as integral parts of society, and not anymore as disposable cogs in a machine. “We fucking want to be inspired!” Thomas desperately says at the end of the novel (Eggers 211). His is a call for help to ask for “grand human projects” to give meaning to his life, but grand does not necessarily mean ‘gigantic’ (Eggers 212). Little is needed to construct meaning for one’s self: one only needs to feel less of a product and more of a human being.

Like in *The Corrections* and *NW*, also in *Your Fathers* there are traces of the erosion of the middle class. In Eggers’s novel, too, there are sings of the social trauma experienced by the most vulnerable sections of this social group. In *Your Fathers*, too, there is the impoverished class, that ‘army’ of desperate and disappointed individuals who have to confront the reality of a socio-economic system that works in a different way from that which they were raised to live in. Together with *NW*, *Your Fathers* depicts the terrible anxieties of the middle class right after the

financial crisis. The next novel I analyze, instead, moves on from this period and observes the middle from a slightly more distant position, but not in the least with a smaller desire to interpret its crisis.

## 5. A New Hope? *Normal People* by Sally Rooney

*It's something to do with capitalism, she said.*

*Yeah. Everything is, that's the problem, isn't it?* (Rooney 34)

Sally Rooney's novel *Normal People* is the fourth and last analyzed in this thesis. The book was published in 2018 – five years after Egger's *Your Fathers* and eleven after *The Corrections* by Franzen – and marks yet another divide in the history of the 21st century West. Rooney published her book in a world that in some ways felt distinctively different from that of *NW* or *Your Fathers*<sup>6</sup>. The historical *milieu* of *Normal People* is that of the post-post-recession: an age that after the fleeting illusions of an economic recovery, a season of anti-authoritarian rebellions in the Middle East, and even the election of the first African-American President in the US, plunged into a much darker reality marked by 'viral' international terrorism, increased economic inequalities, and the emergence of far-right populism. In other words, some of the more dismal nightmares of the early 2000s seemed to turn progressively into frightening realities.

It cannot be a coincidence, then, that Rooney's book is set in a past that is certainly recent, but nevertheless is the *past*. The love-friendship story between Connell and Marianne takes place between January 2011 and February 2015: pretty much the entire span of the post-

<sup>6</sup> This thesis is being written in the very days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impression that such a dramatic, epochal event (and the shared, cultural sense of apocalypse attached to it) is irremediably altering the course of history is strong enough to make me suppose that what the West is experiencing is yet another 'change of world.' Hence the use of the past tense for a book that was published quite literally a few months ago.

crisis period<sup>7</sup>. In this sense, *Normal People* can be read as a lucid reflection on those years that preceded the socio-cultural precipitation of the late 2010s. It is a book that under its surface content of coming-of-age adolescent love story tries to make sense of that period of relative stability and certainty in order to draw some useful conclusions for the chaotic reality of 2018.

Another important difference between *Normal People* and the novels previously discussed is of course the geographical setting. Sally Rooney was born in Castlebar, Ireland, and her book is set between a little town in Sligo and Dublin. Therefore, we are once again changing socio-political context. The fundamental thing to understand in relation to this is that despite having been tied to the UK for a great part of its history, today's Republic of Ireland is, in terms of politics and economics, rather different from Great Britain. Contemporary Ireland is a decisively pro-EU country that seems more interested in strengthening its relationship with the continent rather than with other Anglophone countries (unlike the UK, which after the Brexit vote seems to be trying to align more and more with the US). But most importantly for this thesis, the Republic of Ireland was part of the so-called PIGS group of countries that were more severely hit by the post-2008 recession. After years in which it seemed like it was going to default any minute, Ireland recovered and – helped by the huge amounts of capital moved in after a fiscal reform that made the country a kind of tax haven – now sees its GDP grow at a staggering rate. Yet, the experience of the post-crisis period remained in the collective consciousness of the country, as well as in the structures of class and inequality. And this is exactly what Rooney investigates in her novel: the tosses and turns of a class that in the tumult of financial crashes and economic 'comebacks' sees its standards, its beliefs – in other words its

<sup>7</sup> the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting of Paris, what I identify as the symbolic start of the 'post-post' period, is dated January 7, 2015.

whole ontological system – evaporate before its eyes. What class is this? Well, the middle class, of course.

The third important aspect that needs to be pointed out is that *Normal People* is the first and only novel in this thesis that deals extensively with adolescence and post-adolescence. It is, in other words, a proper *Bildungsroman*. All the other novels that were discussed here dealt, either directly or tangentially, with youth and ‘being young’: in *The Corrections* we get glimpses of Melissa Paquette (the undergrad student Chip has a relationship with), a whole subplot about Denise’s affair with Don Armour during her teenage years, as well as scenes from Gary and Chip’s childhood; in *NW*, Zadie Smith provides fragmented details and information about Natalie’s adolescence; and in *Your Fathers*, Thomas repeatedly mentions moments and events from his youth. Yet, none of these novels make youth and growth a central theme in their narratives. Rooney does, and it is worthwhile asking what is the reason behind this choice. The *Bildungsroman* is a fundamental genre in the history of the novel, and especially so in the relation between this history and that of the modern middle class. The coming of age novel is the type that more evidently shows an interrelation between the literary form and this particular social class: that is because its very narrative basis lies in the actions of young characters who measure themselves with what it means to be or become middle class, and who therefore are either included, rejected, or expelled from this social group. Therefore, Rooney’s operation – to reclaim this genre and somewhat subvert it in order to comment on the decline of the middle class – seems reasonable and, as I shall demonstrate, particularly insightful. But before delving into the *Bildungsroman* structure of *Normal People*, let me once again identify the social status of the main characters of the novel.

## Two ordinary kids

*Normal People* revolves around the on-and-off relationship between a girl and a boy – Marianne and Connell – from the fictional town of Carricklea, in West Ireland. Connell and Marianne go to the same high school: they know about each other, but they have never met. That is, until the first chapter of the book. Because there is something else besides high school that brings the two together: Connell’s mother, Lorraine, works as a cleaning lady in Marianne’s house. The scene of the encounter between these two adolescents introduces directly the central issue of Rooney’s story: the class difference between Connell and Marianne.

This circumstance, as we said, is explicit from the beginning, and also the two kids in question are aware of it. Not long after the first ‘round’ of the relationship has started under the guise of a secret affair, Rooney provides her readers with a glimpse of Marianne’s awareness of the class difference between them:

She’s from a good family and Connell is from a bad one, that much she does know. The Waldrons are notorious in Carricklea. One of Lorraine’s brothers was in prison once... And of course, Lorraine got pregnant at seventeen and left school to have the baby. Nonetheless Connell is considered quite a catch these days. ... That boy is nothing like a Waldron. Marianne’s mother is solicitor. Her father was a solicitor too (32).

Marianne is quite wealthy. she lives in a big mansion and she is clearly and repeatedly signaled as a privileged person. The problem is that her family is a true disaster: Marianne’s father has died years before, and her mother and brother are shown by Rooney to do nothing but abuse her (eventually also physically). She is a shy, introverted girl who has no real friend (Rooney hints at the fact that she gets bullied at school). Connell, on the other hand, lives the exact opposite situation. He is the typical successful, popular, and extroverted guy who plays in

the school's football team and knows everybody. Despite the stories about jail and teenage pregnancies, his nuclear family (that is, his mother) is caring and supportive. In this case, the 'problem' is that the family is solidly and decidedly working-class. The idea of a possible class-based incompatibility first occurs to Connell relatively early in the novel, when Lorraine points to him that Marianne's mother may object to their relationship because "she might consider [them] a little bit beneath her station:"

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" (Rooney 51).

Connell will progressively introject this frustration and turn it into a form of inferiority complex which will have consequences on their relationship as well as on the boy's mental health.

At any rate, after their meeting, Rooney puts the engine of the story in motion and starts to constantly reverse the status of her two protagonists. When after their first break-up Connell and Marianne meet again in university at Trinity College, the tables have turned: now the *bourgeoise* girl is perfectly at ease in the snobbish social milieu of the college, while Connell struggles to fit in. When after a second affair the two drift apart again and Marianne starts dating another, wealthier student, Connell voices explicitly the inferiority complex he had been repressing all along:

Within a couple of weeks she was going out with someone else, a friend of hers called Jamie. Jamie's dad was one of the people who had caused the financial crisis – not figuratively, one of the actual people involved. ... Marianne had just wanted to see someone else all along, he thought. ... She wanted a boyfriend



whose family could take her on skiing holidays. And now that she had one, she wouldn't even answer Connell's emails anymore (Rooney 124-5).

In the remainder of the book, Connell will have to deal with the emergence of a severe depression, which he overcomes and transforms into 'fuel' for his personal growth. Marianne, instead, will continue living her fancy life until her self-punishing behavior and her disturbing family life become impossible to be ignored any longer. The third and final time the two young adults get together, the conditions of Connell and Marianne look both similar and extremely different from where they started, almost as if Rooney's story had produced a synthesis through a Hegelian dialectical process. By the end of the novel the only substantial difference in the relationship is that class is no longer an issue: Connell has won a full scholarship for a postgraduate degree in the US, and Marianne has made herself independent from her family by starting to work. In other words, class is eventually revealed to be an artificial category which they 'inherited' from their families and their social context, but which ultimately is discovered to have no space in their emotional bond and in their relationship.

The swinging balance in Marianne and Connell's relationship may lead to ask: in socio-economic terms, who are these two? How should they be considered in reference to Ventura's theoretical framework? In these terms, Connell seems to be one of the few 'survivors' of the massacre of the lower-middle class in the 21st century: Rooney decides to reward the idealism of his choice to go study literature at Trinity with an important scholarship in an American university, thereby validating all the material and psychological difficulties Connell had to go through. In other words, Rooney is telling the story of one of the few who 'made it' in what Ventura calls the "fratricidal battle" amidst the contemporary lower-middle class (122). I use the term *survivor* – a strong term – for him because Rooney is rather clear in showing how that of

Connell is only one of the few ‘lucky’ stories in the middle of many other disheartening if not outright *tragic* ones.

Shortly after Connell has recovered from his depression, he goes back to Carriclea to attend the funeral of Rob, a high school friend who has recently committed suicide. Judging from Connell’s thoughts at the ceremony, it is evident that Rob is to be understood as the unfortunate *alter ego* of the protagonist, another victim of class dysphoria and of the brutal socio-economic competition of late capitalism which Connell escaped:

Nothing had meant more to Rob than the approval of others; to be thought well of, to be a person of status. He would have betrayed any confidence, any kindness, for the promise of social acceptance. Connell couldn’t judge him for that. He’d been the same way himself, or worse. He had just wanted to be normal, to conceal the parts of himself that he found shameful and confusing (Rooney 212).

*Normal People* does not naively celebrate the success of the bold working class man who rises in the social hierarchy by virtue of his qualities. Quite the contrary, Connell’s success is framed as the exception that demonstrates the reality of what Axel Honneth calls the “unequal distribution of social dignity” (qtd. in Ventura 21). He is a statistical fluctuation that, as Rooney is perfectly aware, cannot refute the principle at the basis of the socio-political order of the 21st century: the illusion of equality in opportunity. In this sense, Rob’s death is there to show that, as Piketty puts it, “equality of rights on the market is not sufficient to guarantee *tout court* equality” (57). Therefore, Rooney implies that Connell is virtually a member of the impoverished class too, and that he is a ‘winner’ only for narrative reasons. His success, far from being a symbol of the success promised to his class as a whole, is the vehicle for a lamentation of all of those who did *not* make it; it is a beacon of light that generates hope, but that also indirectly sheds a light on

the social tragedy that – hushed by the dominant idea of success as an achievement of personal will – risks going unnoticed.

Some may contest the claim that Connell's scholarship is to be intended as an 'advancement' in terms of class. If the question is whether the postgraduate degree in English will certainly guarantee financial stability and social mobility for Connell, the answer is, of course, probably no. But at the same time, it is quite evident that Rooney makes use of the scholarship offer as a narrative reward for the moral integrity demonstrated by Connell over the course of the story. It is very difficult to believe that Rooney would *actually* believe that the postgraduate program will automatically mean social mobility for Connell, therefore this narrative choice raises a question of irony. How should Connell's reward at the end of the novel be interpreted? What seems to be the point in this apparent contradiction between the scholarship as a reward and the impossibility of that providing a 'class leap' is that Rooney highlights the inherent injustice of the education and economic system: for someone who is not born with the means to lead a proper middle class existence, she suggests, not even meritocracy seems enough. Therefore, Connell may be read ironically both as a winner and as a loser, both as an exception and as the norm: under the rule of the seemingly highly-competitive (but really *highly-unequal*) late capitalism, not even merit appears to be enough to truly compensate for social injustice. Read in this way, Connell's ending would be a long-deserved, coming-of-age 'prize' for the qualities he has developed and shown, but at the same time also a sharp critique on the dysfunctionality of the educational and economic systems in fulfilling the promises on which contemporary capitalism is built upon.

On the other hand, one may question the category of 'financial stability' altogether. What would it mean for Connell to get 'financial stability'? Is there a specific sum which, if

accumulated, provides such a thing? Can such a sum even be measured in the context of contemporary economics? In *Capital in the 21st Century*, Piketty makes an interesting observation about the history of the representation of money in the Western novel. In the works of Jane Austen, Henry James, or Balzac, he notes, class and status are always signaled by extremely specific amounts of money. However, roughly around the end of World War I, this way of representing and signaling social status was abruptly abandoned in favor of other, more symbolic markers. The reason for this, Piketty argues, is to be found in the prominent role acquired by inflation during the 20th century: the emergence of rates of inflation incomparably higher to those of the previous centuries<sup>8</sup> meant that, all of a sudden, precise amounts of money became of little if no significance. That is because, with a steadily low inflation, ‘typical’ sums tend to remain typical (with a very low inflation rate, 500 dollars maintain more or less the same symbolic value over a span of decades or even centuries). With high rates of inflation, instead, specific amounts of money become unintelligible and misleading in the matter of a few years. Thus, Piketty concludes,

In contemporary literature and drama, inequalities between social groups appear only as disparity in terms of work, salary, or job position. Society structured by the hierarchy of capital [that of pre-inflation] has been replaced by a society structured almost entirely by the hierarchy of work and human capital (647).

This is, I think, of particular importance in order to understand the meaning of Connell’s scholarship. If, as Piketty demonstrates, financial security cannot be signaled anymore through sums of money but has instead to be expressed through work and, broadly speaking, symbolic

<sup>8</sup> As Piketty demonstrates, until WWI the annual rate of inflation in the West was consistently around below 1%. After 1918, instead, the West started to see inflation grow at the rate of 3-6% annually, peaking as high as even 24% (as it was the case in Britain in 1975).

signifiers, then the ‘uncertainty’ about Connell’s postgraduate program ceases to be a problem. If what is important about it is less the specific sums of money that the degree will give access to than the position in the work hierarchy which the program will provide, then the scholarship offer is certainly a marker of success. It is a success perhaps *more symbolic than material*, but as it is the case for most of the characters analyzed in this thesis, what really matters to the 21st century middle class is not really the concrete and the measurable, but the *relative* and the *perceived*.

Marianne is a little harder to frame. As I mentioned above, she was born into a wealthy family, therefore she never had to worry about money or social status: access to resources and social prestige were always granted to Marianne without her having to earn any of it. It is only when her university friend Joanna gets a job to sustain herself that Marianne starts to realize her *radical unfamiliarity* with the reality of work and employment:

On the phone Joanna frequently describes her office, the various characters who work there, the drama that erupt between them, and it’s as if she’s a citizen of a country Marianne has never visited, the country of paid employment (Rooney 107-8).

It is quite clear that she cannot be described as an impoverished middle class girl. However, the solution to this little ‘dilemma’ – as well as the key to the significance of the character of Marianne in the social context – lies in the narrative trajectory Rooney devises for her. As we said, by the end of the novel Marianne has distanced herself from her mother and brother, and refuses to endure any longer the abusive behavior of her relatives. This act, which one may call an act of ‘spiritual independence,’ entails also the necessity of becoming

*economically* independent: hence she gets a job as a secretary for “some kind of property developer” (Rooney 254-5).

It is important to note that Marianne’s ‘liberation’ from her family and their middle class status has a particular moral connotation in the novel. Throughout *Normal People*, Rooney repeatedly associates upper-middle class status with low ethical standards and with extensive responsibilities for the imbalances of Western society and economy. I have quoted above a passage in which Jamie – Marianne’s boyfriend in Dublin after she breaks up with Connell – is presented as the son of “one of the people who had caused the financial crisis” (Rooney 124). It is hard to believe that this is only a relatively unimportant detail, especially when grouped with all the other negative moral connotations that Rooney associates with upper-middle classes: the violence of Marianne’s relatives, the selfishness of the ‘rich kids’ of Trinity, and even the shady business led by the ‘property developer’ for which Marianne starts working at the end of the novel. In regards to the wealthy middle class, Rooney’s argument seems to be that this social group is morally corrupted and that the only way to escape ‘collective responsibility’ in its wrongdoings is to renounce to the undeserved privileges that such a status offers.

However, there is something slightly paradoxical about the character arch of Marianne: in making her ‘regress’ to the status of an employed worker, Rooney seems to imply that Marianne’s reward – her cathartic closure – lies in becoming part of the impoverished class. Or at the very least, she shows her character as being *much better off* with an unstable job paid in cash. But after all that was written about the tragedy of the precariat in this thesis, how can this be considered a reward? How can we think of Marianne’s arch as a positive one? The answer is, I think, in the social allegory proposed by the finale on the novel. But to explain that, we first

have to consider the question of *genre* and the way in which *Normal People* works as a *Bildungsroman*.

### Can classes come of age too?

In *The Way of the World*, Franco Moretti describes the Western *Bildungsroman* as the “‘symbolic form’ of modernity,” with modernity intended as “a bewitching and risky process full of ‘great expectations’ and ‘lost illusions’” (555). Moretti argues that this particular form of the novel – which in some way can be thought of as the most important novelistic genre of all, almost as the pillar, the *root* of novelistic tradition in the West – emerged as an artistic attempt to disentangle the sudden complexity acquired by youth with the advent of the industrial age. Progressively, the *Bildungsroman* acquired a central, allegorical significance as the genre that best expressed modernity’s impulse to “[seek] its meaning in the *future* rather than in the past<sup>9</sup>” (556). After delineating this ‘genealogy’ of the genre, however, Moretti moves on to analyze the ways in which coming of age novel works. He formulates two basic guiding principles for the progression into adulthood of characters in *Bildungsromans*: borrowing from Darwin’s theories on evolution, he identifies, on the one hand, the *classification* principle, and on the other the *transformation* principle.

That of classification is essentially a teleological principle: in a *Bildungsroman* dominated by classification, “the meaning of events lies in their finality” (Moretti 557). That is to say,

<sup>9</sup> Of course, the connection here is provided by the analogy between the concepts of ‘becoming an adult’ and ‘progress into the future.’

narrative transformations have meaning insofar as they lead to a particularly marked ending: one that establishes a classification different from the initial one but nonetheless perfectly clear and stable[...] ... [E]vents acquire meaning when they led [sic] to *one* ending, and one only (Ibidem).

The classification principle, Moretti explains, operates mostly in the Anglo-Germanic tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. It is, in other words, the normative code lying beneath the plots of Jane Austen, Goethe, Dickens and so forth: a young man or woman struggles with a number of narrative obstacles until eventually he or she is rewarded with a plot resolution (usually marriage) that ensures a stable and definitive 'leap' into a wealthier class. The 'coming of age,' the acquisition of maturity in these novel is therefore mainly associated with a distinctively bourgeois sense of material affluence as the ultimate finality. To put it differently: biological-psychological growth is directly tied to *economic* growth.

The transformation principle, as Moretti defines is, is in direct opposition to the classification one. In works that follow the transformation principle, meaningfulness is provided by "narrativity, [by virtue of] being an open-ended process" (Ibidem). Transformation prescribes that meaning cannot coincide with the fulfillment of a teleology. In rather opposite way, it functions through

the total rejection of such a solution. The ending, the privileged narrative moment of taxonomic mentality, becomes the most meaningless one here: ...[the transformation principle is] a narrative logic according to which a story's meaning resides precisely in the impossibility of "fixing" it (Ibidem).

If classification was typical of English and Germanic writers, transformation is instead the common mode in French and Russian novels, which tend to reject endings that 'solve' in



favor of others that posit a question or present one more incentive for reflection on a certain number of themes.

Now, how does this apply to *Normal People*, and specifically to its finale? Rooney's choice to give equal importance to Marianne and Connell creates a number of problems and complications. First of all, because *Bildungsromans* tend to follow the progress and development of a single character, whereas here we are following two young people whose path continuously intersect and drift part throughout the narrative. Secondly – and most importantly – Rooney's novel is problematic because both of Moretti's principles simultaneously dominate the story. This is of course evident only when looking at the ending: if on the one hand Rooney stages the 'classical' fulfillment of the classification principle through Connell – whose admission into the postgraduate program is symbolically comparable to what a successful marriage means in classification *Bildungsromans* – she also asserts the transformation principle through Marianne, whose open-ended resolution posits more questions than it may resolve<sup>10</sup>.

My identification of Marianne as a *Bildungsroman* character that follows the transformation principle may even be problematic in its own terms to some. This is because Moretti, in distinguishing between the principles states:

Where the transformation principle prevails and youthful dynamism is emphasized ... youth cannot or does not want to give way to maturity: the young hero senses in fact in such a "conclusion" a sort of betrayal, which would *deprive* his youth of its meaning rather than enrich it (558).

<sup>10</sup> Will she really be able to 'abjure' her former social condition in the future? Will she really "always be here" for Connell? In other words, are her fundamental internal conflict truly *fixed* by the end of the novel? (Rooney 266).

Some may argue that by the end of *Normal People* Marianne *does* give way to maturity: after all, her choices to start working and keep the relationship with Connell going (or at least to keep the *emotional connection* going) seem to indicate the acquisition of a certain adulthood on the part of Marianne. But on the other hand, her independence can also be read as a way to *start the process in the first place*: Marianne's independence can be read – as I do here in thesis – as the actual start of her adolescence, or at least as a *second start* to it: the concept of 'adolescence' I have in mind here is one that entails the notion of a period in which a person distances from the dependence to the nuclear family and starts taking important decisions for herself. Thus to Marianne, the ending becomes paradoxically a way to *add value* to an adolescence of which she was to a certain extent deprived over the course of the novel.

But let me move on to discuss the ending as it relates to both characters and to its symbolic social significance. Following his line of argument on the two competing principles in the Western *Bildungsroman*, Moretti affirms that, in fact, both forces operate in all coming of age books, and that the dominance of one principle over the other is only relative and never absolute. Then, he moves on to discuss the various failed attempts (in his opinion) to produce a synthesis – in the Hegelian sense of the word – of the two principles in the history of the genre. Rejecting the possibility of accomplishing such a thing, Moretti writes of the way in which these novels produce instead compromise, "the novel's most celebrated theme" (559). The need to construct and produce a compromise is intended by Moretti as the driving force behind the *Bildungsroman*, which is constantly attempting to negotiate an acceptable 'middle ground' between self-determination and socialization in its characters (naturally with the aim of providing behavioral models to its readers). The question at the heart of the *Bildungsroman* is, as he writes, the following:

How can the tendency toward *individuality*, which is the necessary fruit of a culture of self-determination, be made to coexist with the opposing tendency to *normality*, the offspring, equally inevitable, of the mechanism of socialization?  
(562)

This problem is, not surprisingly, also at the core of Rooney's book, which not by chance is titled exactly *Normal People*.

Now, I believe 'normality' can be interpreted in two distinct ways in relation to Rooney's novel. There is a more immediate, almost obvious sense of the word that has to do with the psychology of Connell and Marianne and to their processes of construction of an adult personality. But there is also a secondary, implicit meaning of normality. It is one that has to do with the socio-economic historical 'landscape' lived by the two characters and with the need to find a solution to its inherent contradictions. Connell and Marianne's quest for normality can be interpreted as the desire to construct a socio-economic stability; as an escape from the brutal and eternally provisional "permanent revolution" of late capitalism (qtd. in Moretti 555). To put it more clearly: it is a quest for a new social-economic order. Read with this in mind, the ending of the book becomes something akin to a new *social contract*: both Connell's admission to the postgraduate program and – most importantly – Marianne's decision to step down from her social privilege to 'meet him in the middle' express Rooney's proposal to finally transcend the rigid class warfare structures of late capitalism and usher in a new social and economical order. An order that, through the strength of compromise (or perhaps that of *synthesis*?), can achieve the pacification of a social community devastated by decades of living under a system that has demonstrated the impossibility of delivering its basic promises. In this sense, *Normal People* expands the principal function of the *Bildungsroman*, that of the attempt to "build the Ego," into

an endeavor to construct a new social model; it suggests an attempt to *build the Nos* as a way to prevent fratricidal battles and mutual assured social destruction (Moretti 560). *This* is what ‘normal people’ means: a society liberated from the impulse to compete ruthlessly for the allocation of resources to which there is no need to impose scarcity upon. *This* is the meaning of Rooney’s comment on Marianne at the end of the novel. When her character adheres to this new social contract, the author can finally say: “She’s a normal person now” (Rooney 254).

What is left unsaid in the ending of the book is that Connell, too, has become a normal person. As I argued, the attainment of normality is here to be intended as the establishment of a new social pact that transcends the rigidity of class. In other words, Rooney appropriates the meaning of the world ‘normal’ from the domain of *bourgeoise* aspirations (the middle class individual who desires to ‘be normal,’ or to *conform*) and *re-connotates* it ironically to signify her rejection of class hierarchies. Her concept of ‘normality’ is one that goes beyond that of bourgeois categorization, and as such poses itself as a solution to the inextricable dilemma of relative status perception. A society that, following the example of Connell and Marianne, refuses to engage in positional arm races for status is a society that has let go of class warfare and that, as such, defuses any threat of erosion in a particular social group. The attainment of normality by Connell and Marianne is therefore that for which virtually all the characters analyzed in the other three novels were looking for: a cure for the terrible ‘poison’ of ruthless and desperate social competition.

## 6. The Form of the middle class

*all generic categories, even the most time-hallowed and traditional, are ultimately to be understood (or “estranged”) as mere ad hoc, experimental constructs, devised for a specific textual occasion and abandoned like so much scaffolding when the analysis has done its work (Jameson 411).*

This final chapter deals with form. After having delved extensively into each novel’s representation of the contemporary middle class, it is time to ask what role is being played in my discussion by the form and structure of the four novels. How does the manner in which these stories and these characters are told affect the meaning of the novels? How does form affect its cultural *significance*? How does it affect *readability*? The aim of this chapter is only partially to categorize the kinds of novels previously discussed in this thesis. Its main objective is to connect these types to my main subject – the crisis of the middle class in the 21st century – in the attempt to discern the ‘condition of the novel’ in the context of the socio-economic turbulences we have been discussing. In other words, this chapter tries to answer the following question: is the novel still a viable narrative medium for the representation and the expression of the middle class?

In an article published by Treccani’s online magazine *Il Tascabile*, Di Paolo and Santoni ask more or less the same question:

The number of novelists and aspiring novelists has never been so large. But what about that of the readers? Is the space that the novel-form occupies in our lives gradually reducing? What space is this, precisely? What kind of alternative does it

keep offering in contrast to other types of narrative? (“Il destino del romanzo, parte prima”).

In the 21st century, the novel finds itself in a position in which it has to ‘compete’ with other narrative genres as vehicle for the expression and self-representation of the middle class. Today in Western countries, films, TV series, social media contents, and even videogames<sup>11</sup> are being consumed in numbers comparable (and many times even *superior*) to those of novels, thus challenging the ‘supremacy’ that this latter form had in previous centuries as the vehicle of expression of the conscience of the middle class *as a class*. The pre-eminent, hegemonic role that the novel had in the 19th century (especially in the second half of it) has been lost in favor of a ‘dispersion’ of the middle class conscience into an array of forms (film, television etc.), all distinctively different from each other. It has therefore become necessary to ask: in an age in which the Western middle class finds itself disoriented and threatened to be pushed back into the lower strata of the social hierarchy, how can the novel avoid to be eroded too as a narrative genre? Is this genre equipped to keep representing the collective consciousness of the middle class? What *kind* of novel is most suitable to the survival of the ‘vitality’ of the genre? What direction should the novel take in order to keep narrating the middle class in the future?

To answer these questions, I shall look into the specificities of the forms of each of the novels I have analyzed in the thesis. These four novels vary substantially from each other in terms of form, and I believe they can be presented as good examples for the main stylistic paradigms of the contemporary novel. Before doing that, though, the association between the novel as a literary genre and the middle class has to be clarified. I say above that the novel used to be the primary, preferred vehicle of expression for the middle class’ collective consciousness.

<sup>11</sup> These last two media have to be intended here solely in their strictly *narrative* forms.

But on what basis can this be said? *Why* is the novel so strictly connected to this particular social class, and why is this important for the contemporary forms of this genre?

### **Elective affinities**

To discuss the reciprocal importance between the novel and the middle class means essentially to delineate a genealogy, a *history* of the bond between the literary genre and the social group. This bond has been the focus of theoretical interest for quite a long time, and the critical sources on the topic are abundant. Many commentators have attempted to delineate a history of the novel that associates the literary genre to the emergence of the middle class in modern times. Let me therefore review a few of these arguments.

The general consensus on the origin of the novel is that this genre originated out of the epic as a ‘mutation’ of the Medieval *romance*. How can this mutation be understood as an event that was more or less significantly precipitated at least *also* by the rise of the Western middle class? In *Meditations on Quixote*, Ortega y Gasset identifies Cervantes’s masterpiece as the first, prototypical instance of the new genre of the novel. In this new genre, Ortega y Gasset identifies realism as the revolutionary element that differentiates the novel from the romance. ‘Realism’ is by him understood as the successful completion of the task of “representing for us in concrete form what we already knew in the abstract” on the part of the novelist (*Meditations on Quixote* 277). It is, in other words, a connotation of realism that more or less coincides with verisimilitude. But why was the romance ‘updated’ with a *vocation* for realism? Ortega y Gasset motivates the transformation of the romance into the novel as being driven by the scientific discourse:

When the vision of the world which the myth supplies is deprived of its command over human souls by its hostile sister, science, the epic loses its religious gravity and dashes forth in search of adventures (279).

The Scientific Revolution is a phenomenon that emerges out of the Renaissance, and it can be interpreted as the first of the middle class revolutions, or at least certainly as the one that fueled all the successive *bourgeoise*-led revolutions (chiefly the Industrial and the French ones, but also the emergence of capitalism). Consequently, Ortega y Gasset connects the two concepts of Renaissance and Scientific Revolution to explain the emergence of a work such as *Don Quixote*:

Cervantes looks at the world from the height of the Renaissance. The Renaissance has tightened things a little more and has completely overcome the old sensibility. With his physics, Galileo lays down the stern laws which govern the universe. A new system has begun; everything is confined within stricter forms (282).

Discussing the same problem of the transformation of the epic into the novel – but approaching it from a different point of view – Lukács talks of the latter as “an expression of ... transcendental homelessness” of the “form-giving subject” in regards to “the world of created forms” (185). In a highly historicizing fashion, therefore, Lukács identifies the emergence of the novel with the emergence of modernity as an historic-philosophical category. As he writes:

The epic and the novel ... differ from one another not by their authors’ fundamental intentions but by the given historic-philosophical realities with which the authors were confronted. The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of



meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality (186).

Therefore, novelistic heroes are alienated beings; they are “the product of estrangement from the outside world” (Lukács 192). It is the destabilizing, alienating paradigm-change of modernity – which, of course, includes revolutions in all the major areas of society (philosophy, economy etc.) – that generates the conditions for the emergence of this new genre. The association with the middle class here is implicit, but it is quite obviously there: following Marx’s interpretation, Lukács sees modernity as the historical era driven, conditioned, and ultimately dominated by the bourgeoisie. Therefore the novel, too, can be considered as an ‘ancillary product’ of such historical developments.

Benjamin, too, connects the invention of the novel with the alienation of modern society. For him, the novel is the product of the isolation of the author; it is the literary consequence of the emergence of individualism. “The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual,” Benjamin writes (80). But the concepts of isolation and individualism do not apply only to those who produce novels, but also to the (far larger in terms of number) category of the consumers of this genre. Indeed, Benjamin seems to associate to readers of novels the same ‘sins’ usually thought to be distinctive of the *petit bourgeoisie*: the consumer of novels is a jealous owner who is ready to “make [the material] completely his own;” someone for whom reading is an eminently private activity—an activity that separates him from society (Benjamin 88). The connection that Benjamin establishes between the novel and the middle class is already quite clear in these qualities he assigns to both writer and reader, but he also takes it upon himself to state it explicitly:

It took the novel, whose beginnings go back to antiquity, hundreds of years before it encountered in the evolving middle class those elements which were favorable to its flowering. ... with the full control of the middle class, which has the press as one of its most important instruments in fully developed capitalism, there emerges a form of communication which, no matter how far back its origin may lie, never before influenced the epic form in a decisive way (80).

The interesting element here is that Benjamin seems to talk of the novel as a genre that had a long ‘incubation period:’ a period (supposedly Greek and Roman antiquity) in which there existed prose forms with the *potential* of being novels, but which had yet to encounter their social catalyst (the middle class). This may lead to wonder whether it would be possible to detect a latent, ‘incubating’ middle class in the commercial classes of pre-modern times but, at any rate, what is important for my argument is to acknowledge how Benjamin strongly correlates the emergence of the novel as a distinguished genre with the rise of the middle class in the West.

The most systematic study of such a correlation between literary and social history was conducted by Ian Watt. In *The Rise of the Novel*, Watt investigates the social and cultural forces behind the appearance of the works of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding—the three authors conventionally identified as the initiators of the novelistic tradition as a deliberate genre. Similarly to Ortega y Gasset, Watt recognizes the fundamental innovation of the novel in the concept of realism, which he defines specifically as ‘formal realism.’ Combining this notion with a Benjamin-esque focus on the impact of individualism, Watt argues that “modern realism ... has its origins in Descartes and Locke,” that is to say in the idea that “truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses” (365). Therefore, as a product of 17th and 18th century rationalism, is

the form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation. Previous literary forms had reflected the general tendency of their cultures to make conformity to traditional practice the major test of truth (366).

Post-Watt British theorists will expand on this analysis – even when partially rejecting some of its conclusions – to make even more evident the relationship between the rise of the novel and the emergence of the middle class in England. Linking his analysis to major changes in ethical paradigms at the beginning of modernity, Michael McKeon argues that “it is clear that ... the emerging novel also has *internalized* the emergence of the middle class in its preoccupation with the problem of how virtue is signified (“Generic Transformation” 396). McKeon also further investigates the emergence of realism – which he calls “true history” – and identifies three historical events that allowed such a cultural development: the Scientific Revolution, the invention of the press, and the Protestant Reformation (385). Once again, these historical turning points are among those that are often associated with the emergence of the middle class as a distinct social group in the West. Lastly, Tarantelli et al. propose an understanding of the invention of the English novel in the 18th century as a form of social compromise. The modern novel is born in England, they argue, between two revolutions:

after the definitive defeat of the Court and of aristocratic domination, but before the advent of the industrial middle class as the hegemonic class. In a period, that is, characterized by pacification and compromise between the various factions of the English dominant class (Tarantelli et al. 25).

The novel thus becomes a tool employed to assert a social and cultural hegemony. It is “a *function*, an element amidst a vaster system: the culture of the 18th century English middle class” (Tarantelli et al. 36).

As the work of these critics demonstrates rather clearly, the affinity between the novel and the middle class should not be considered an accident of history. Quite the contrary, the novel should be seen as a direct consequence of the rise of the middle class. Consequently, there is a reason behind the central role that the novel played in the expression of the values and dilemmas of the middle class ever since the end of the 18th century and at least up until the advent of modernism. That reason has to do with the suitability of the novel as a genre to the characteristics, the problems, and the pragmatic solutions of the middle class as a social group. Approximately after World War I, the novel began to be ‘challenged’ by other competing narrative forms, and its role was progressively re-shaped to make space for media as diverse as film, radio, television, and more recently social networks and videogames. Today the novel appears as one among the many genres through which the middle class represents itself and its reality: it is certainly the one with the most prestigious past, but it is also that which seems to be more in need of innovation and re-invention. Notwithstanding the many contradictory signs given by the book market – which seems to intermittently either go well or be on the verge of collapse – it is undeniable that the novel has been accompanied at least for the past sixty years or so by a sense of anguish in regards to its future. That of the saturation of the novelistic form in a very old argument, and one which persisted even after the period of modernism, during which the novel was a field of experimentation favored by many authors. In 1948, Ortega y Gasset could still (or already?) talk about the novel as a genre on the verge of exhausting itself:

It is erroneous to think of the novel ... as of an endless field capable of rendering ever new forms. Rather it may be compared to a vast but finite quarry. There exist a definite number of possible themes for the novel. The workmen of the primal hour had no trouble finding new blocks—new characters, new themes. But

present-day writers face the fact that only narrow and concealed veins are left them (“Notes on the Novel” 294).

This problem – or at least *the perception of the existence of such problem* – has persisted until today. Indeed, with the emergence of a crisis in the fabric and structure of the middle class, it can even be said that the problem has worsened. It has therefore arrived the moment to come back to the four novels analyzed in this thesis, but this time with a question about their form: what are the stylistic characteristics of *The Corrections*, *NW*, *Your Fathers*, and *Normal People*? How do they pose themselves in relation to the question of the saturation of the novel? And most importantly: does any of these novels present a stylistic configuration that could be reasonably imagined to be a workable model to ensure the continuation of the novel’s vitality in the 21st century? To attempt an answer to these questions, I will move on to analyze one by one the form of these novels.

### **The Corrections’ Neo-Victorianism**

In regards to style and form, Franzen’s novel is a peculiar creature. The general configuration of the book is rather classical. That is to say: it follows certain basic conventions, certain rules established during the ‘classical’ age of the novel in the second half of the 19th century (these conventions include, for instance, a third-person narrator and the use of so-called ‘zero-focalization’<sup>12</sup>); in other words, the basic structure of *The Corrections* looks *familiar* to the

12 As Fludernik explains, in narratives using zero focalization – a term coined by Gérard Genette – “the authorial narrator is above the world of the action, looks down on it and is able to see into the characters’ minds as well as shifting between the various locations [and times] where the story takes place” (38). As it is evident even to the most inexpert reader of novels, this is the case in most of the ‘classic’ novels of Western literature, and especially in those from the 19th century.

average reader. Yet, Franzen's book is not conventional: his use of the classical, somewhat 'Victorian' conventions of the genre seems to be employed both as a nostalgic revival and as an ironical device.

Franzen's operation is a nostalgic revival because his use of the classical form of the novel comes after a long season of exploration and experimentation with this form in Western culture. When *The Corrections* is published in 2001, Western culture had already seen (and virtually exhausted) postmodernism and its permanent stylistic revolution which bent and stretched conventional stylistic structures in the attempt to discover the appropriate technique for the narration of post-industrial societies. Franzen's operation, then, seems to be an acknowledgment of postmodernism's failure (or at least of its end) in regards to the novel and a re-assertion of the conventional stylistic standards. As I said, this is a nostalgic operation. But it is also a sort of restoration: it is a way for Franzen to put things back in order and try to recover rationality and stability in the face of the confusion and destabilization generated by globalization. From a 21st century perspective (and therefore with the advantage of writing *ex post facto*) McKenzie Wark argues that

The bourgeois novel is a genre of fantasy fiction smeared with naturalistic details — filler — to make it appear otherwise. It excludes the totality so that bourgeois subjects can keep prattling on about their precious "inner lives" ("On the Obsolence").

Franzen seems to desire to recuperate the naturalistic clarity of the Victorian novel to cope with the *real opaqueness* of the 21st century. But just as the clarity of the Victorian novel was a construct – itself devised as a coping mechanism to deal with the socio-political chaos of the 19th century – *The Corrections'* naturalism, too, is evidently a fabrication.

As for irony, the novel does something interesting with style and form: Victorian structure is not only passively recuperated, but also *overdriven and exhausted* in what appears to be a parodical operation. In Franzen's obsessive and excessive use of details, in his use of ridiculous and hyperbolic fictional events and objects (odd substances like Mexican A or Correcketail, the disintegration of Lithuania's institutions etc.), and in his extremely long authorial invectives it is possible to discern the author's desire to make a critical statement on both the socio-political system he lives in and, most importantly, *on the novel-form itself*. Therefore, the recuperation of the classical novel is to be intended also as an implicit critique of this form.

Was such an operation successful? Does Franzen's book *work*? *The Corrections* is a novel that deliberately plays upon its exaggerations to create a comical effect – and in this sense it is certainly a successful work – but it is difficult not to agree with Annesley, who regards “Franzen's design” to be “too dense, weighty, and convoluted to achieve its goals” (122). This is particularly true when thinking of the questions I am trying to answer in this chapter: it seems difficult to believe that such a baroque and verbose style may prove to ensure the ‘survival’ of the novel's vitality in the 21st century. Specifically, it is difficult to imagine a work like *The Corrections* as appealing to a wide section of the public, let alone to a public as wide as that which the novel enjoyed during its golden age. *The Corrections* is certainly a valuable and wonderfully constructed work, but it does not seem adequate to meet the demands that 21st century Western culture makes in terms of readability, or at least not those that are made for works that aspire to escape the niches of experts and intellectuals.

## The Neo-Modernism of Smith and Eggers

Smith and Eggers's books chose completely different stylistic models from those of Franzen. If the complex formal architecture of *The Corrections* suggested a recuperation of the 'classicism' of the Victorian novel, the experimentalism of *NW* and *Your Fathers* evokes instead the innovative slant of modernism. Naturally, this is not to say that the two works are *actually* similar in form. Smith and Egger's novels are fairly different from each other – *NW* is the result of the de-constructive, fragmentative, and impressionistic operations; *Your Fathers* is instead the product of a 'dramatization' that makes the novel similar to a play or a screenplay – but they undeniably share a similar *experimental* attitude that seems to be, once again, a nostalgic recuperation. The difference with Franzen's recuperation, as I suggested above, is that Smith and Egger's models are not Charles Dickens or George Eliot, but Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. If *The Corrections* can be seen as a Neo-Victorian novel, then *NW* and *Your Father* seem attempts at a Neo-Modernism.

David James puts it rather clearly: "[e]very page of *NW* exudes the earnestness of her will-to-experiment. It's a modernist gesture of sorts" (205). Zadie Smith's use of fragmentation and impressionistic techniques is quite evidently a deliberate operation attempted with the aim of finding an innovative way to narrate the confusing, 'accelerated' reality of the post-2008 West. In this sense, Smith's operation is honest and certainly valuable, and indeed it may have something of what Morris describes (with what to me appears as slightly incorrect terminology) as 'post-postmodernism:'

In a nutshell, ... in response to postmodernism's playful destabilizations and ebullient uncertainty, this recent literary movement ... is supposed to coincide with a revived artistic and academic focus on new possibilities of sincerity in



order to transcend postmodernism's use of self-reflexive irony (Homberg-Schramm et al. 117).

Smith's recuperation of modernist techniques would then be a way to surpass the parodic experimentalism of postmodernism in favor of a new 'true' attempt at experimentation that would achieve a more faithful depiction of the subject matter.

David Eggers, too, seems to aim at something similar, though through the use of a different technique. As I said, *Your Fathers* does not employ any kind of narrative impressionism, but rather focuses on speech and characters. The result is a novel that looks much more like a play. In truth, as Morris notes, Eggers's book *does* have something in common with the postmodernists, specifically in

the incompatibility between the urge to provide the reader with ethical values and absolute truths and postmodern culture's aversion to reducing a complex and ambiguous reality to a simple and univocal moral position (Homberg-Schramm et al. 121).

However, if looked at it from a general perspective, Eggers's operation is absolutely analogous to that of Smith. These two writers are both attempting to expand the capabilities of the novel through formal experimentations, with the clear objective of enabling the genre to keep narrating a social reality that has drastically changed in the recent past. The question is, again: was this operation successful? Is it possible to think of *NW* and *Your Fathers* as possible models for how the novel should look like in the 21st century?

My answer is: no, not really. As also David James notes, Zadie Smith's *NW* "appears to be attempting so much, on so many formal and thematic fronts, that it can't decide what it wants to be" (204). More or less the same applies also for *Your Fathers*. The problem with the formal

characteristics of these two novels is that the experimentation, instead of allowing a more direct reception of the content and of meaning, ends up alienating the reader, forcing him either to a second read or to dismiss the book as overly complicated. In other words, this kind of experimentalism runs the great risk of turning the novel into a specialist interest: it risks becoming too distant from the average sensibility to keep playing a concrete role in the public, mainstream cultural debate. This evaluation is substantially in line with that of Marcus, who writing about the generation following the example of David Foster Wallace (whom he calls the ‘Post-hysterics’), affirms:

Kinetic, fractal, encyclopedic in detail and entropic by design, they often spoke too loudly, too feverishly, too cleverly and chaotically. In their effort to seek out the human, they drew too much in. Instead of transcending those dull noises that drone out the simpler, more humane frequencies of everyday life, they often found themselves adding to the sonic distortion (67-8).

Smith and Eggers’s re-enactment thus seems only that: a re-enactment; a sterile literary game incapable of generating the kind of cultural vitality needed by the novel to preserve a role of significance in the conscience of the 21st century middle class. It is difficult, then, not to agree with Fisher in his comment about this very phenomenon of the re-staging of the attitudes and practices of modernism under capitalist realism:

Capitalist realism no longer stages this kind of confrontation with modernism. On the other contrary, it takes the vanquishing of modernism for granted: modernism is now something that can periodically return, but only as a frozen aesthetic style, never as an ideal for living (8).

But if neither a restoration of the Victorian nor a recuperation of the modernist are viable formal options, how is the 21st century novel supposed to look like? What formal strategy—what stylistic operation is at least potentially capable of offering a future for the novel? Unlike the other novels I analyze here, Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* may be capable of providing a practicable option.

### **Sally Rooney and the novel of the future**

Up until this point, my arguments have been backed by extensive research and careful assessment of critical sources. Naturally, this was possible because the subjects I have focused on – the novel as a genre and the three novels by Franzen, Smith, and Eggers – have been subject to public debate for an amount of time necessary to the production of critical analyses of them. With *Normal People*, the situation is substantially different: Sally Rooney’s novel is particularly recent, and therefore the amount of critical material on it is insufficient if not virtually inexistent. Consequently, the claims made in the remainder of the chapter should be intended merely as *suggestions* that – lacking critical material to put them in dialogue with – in no way intend to be conclusive. My ideas on the style on *Normal People*, therefore, are to be read solely as ideas, as *tentative hypotheses* proposed in the attempt to contribute building a theoretical framework both for the novel itself and for the future of the genre as a whole. In the hope that these hypotheses may turn out to be useful towards its understanding, I therefore move on to discuss the style of *Normal People*.

In discussing *NW*, David Marcus wrote that “what we need today is a more sociological realism: a social novel capable of capturing not only the ways we experience life but also the ways in which it *happens* to us” (69). I am inclined to agree with him, but I believe that this

quality of ‘sociological realism’ is to be found more in *Normal People* than in Zadie Smith’s book. As I show in the chapter dedicated to it, Rooney’s novel achieves the goal of describing the post-2008 condition of the Western middle class through a coming of age story centered around its two main characters. But Rooney’s achievement has to be measured also in relation to the formal qualities of her novel: and *Normal People* is a brilliant example of fine writing, stylistic minimalism, and most importantly of *readability*. The novel is clear, direct, and surgical without being affected neither by Franzen’s verbosity nor by Eggers or Smith’s experimental artificiality. *Normal People* is an extremely simple reading (almost a *pop* novel), but also a surprisingly significant book in terms of its socio-economic analysis. How does its author strike such a balance between entertainment and social commentary?

The answer is, I think, in Rooney’s decision to accept stylistic influences from other narrative media, particularly from film and television. Many decades before the publication of *Normal People*, Ortega y Gasset was already discussing how novelistic writing was undergoing important stylistic changes:

from being pure narration which but alludes, the novel has advanced to strict presentation. ... From being narrative and indirect the novel has become direct and descriptive. The best word would be “presentative.” The imperative of the novel is autopsy. No good telling us what a person is, we want to see with our own eyes (“Notes on the Novel” 296).

This transformation towards the ‘presentative’ of which Ortega y Gasset speaks seems to have much to do with the visual, and therefore can be understood at least partially as the result of the influence of filmic language over literary writing. But in the context of his argument ‘filmic language’ has to be understood as *strictly* filmic—that is, as the language of feature films. What

Ortega y Gasset could not have included in his analysis – and what he perhaps could not even foresee – was how the language of serial TV would precipitate this trend. And this is exactly what I believe happens in *Normal People*: the novel is structured in a handful of self-conclusive chapters that seem to strongly resemble the way in which contemporary TV series are organized. Furthermore, Rooney’s dry, simple, and yet clear and descriptive language moves within and between scenes as if it was the camera of a director, which through close-ups catches the emotions of characters with surgical precision without ever making itself perceived as present. It is almost as the ‘zero focalization’ of conventional novelistic (and Franzen’s) style has mutated into a ‘camera eye,’ an innovative stylistic solution strongly influenced by the language of film and serial television. It is precisely *this* formal quality that makes the novel so accessible and readable.

It would be now interesting to recall Bakhtin’s words about the stylistic influence of the novel over other genres:

The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genre and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, re-formulating and re-accentuating them (322-3).

Implied in this argument there is the sense of the novel as the ‘hegemonic’ narrative genre of modernity. After all, it is Bakhtin himself who acknowledges that “in an era in which the novel reigns supreme [that is, modernity] almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent ‘novelized’” (323). Bakhtin, however, passed away in 1975, and things have changed quite considerably since that time. In fact, *Normal People* is a good example to explain how Bakhtin basic idea of influence of a genre over another is still valid, but only if one reverses

the terms of the equation. Paraphrasing him, one might say that in an era in which filmic-visual discourse reigns supreme, all the remaining genres (particularly the novel) become to a certain extent more visual.

Of course, I do not intend to argue that Rooney's book passively surrenders to such influences and somehow degrades the 'purity' of novelistic tradition. Nor do I intend to imply that the only way to survive for the novel is to blindly imitate the techniques of serial television. Instead, my focus is on how Rooney's stylistic solution should be intended as an exceptional achievement: hers is a particularly successful operation of synthesis between the established conventions of novelistic writing and the omnipresent and greatly influential narrative techniques of film and episodic television; one that, by virtue of its remarkable simplicity, manages to bypass any kind of sophisticated experimentalism. It is, to put it simply, a great operation of inventive genius that indicates to the novel one of the possible directions to follow for the rest of the century.

In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács describes the importance of Cervantes's achievement in writing the first novel of the Western canon in the following terms:

Cervantes lived in the period of the last, great and desperate mysticism, the period of a fanatical attempt to renew the dying religion from within; a period of a new view of the world rising up in mystical forms; the last period of truly lived but already disoriented, tentative, sophisticated, occult aspirations.

It was the period of the demons let loose, a period of great confusion of values in the midst of an as yet unchanged value system (211).

Now, it is beyond certain that Rooney's achievement is nowhere as revolutionary as Cervantes's: *Normal People* does not mark the invention of a completely new literary genre, and

therefore presumably it will not have the same cultural impact that *Don Quixote* had on Western culture. Yet, the similarities between the historical circumstances which Lukács describes and those in which the West currently finds itself are fascinating. Is it also possible to think of Rooney as an innovator of the novel who, if not comparable to Cervantes, is at least of an importance worthy of careful study and consideration? Perhaps, while Rooney's novel will not initiate a new genre, *Normal People* will be an important step in the formulation of a new standard for the novel in the 21st century.

As it is with any kind of prediction, and particularly in those about the future of artistic forms, only time will tell. *Normal People* indicates a very clear and feasible direction for the development of the novel in the 21st century, but it is impossible to say if the genre will actually follow it. The only certainty about the novel is that which Bakhtin expresses in one of his essays:

the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted.

The forces that define it as a genre are at work before our very eyes: the birth and development of the novel as a genre takes place in the full light of the historical day. The generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities (321).

## 7. Conclusions: Life after the middle class?

What is there left to say? This thesis revolved around two words, two concepts – *novel* and *middle class* – who seem to be inextricably related to each other. Over the course of these few pages, I have had the opportunity to first look at how, through narrative, the middle class represents its profound crisis and deals with the fear of being disappearing. Later, in the final chapter, I observed how the novel articulates this cultural and historical moment through its formal configuration. One might say I have looked both at the condition of the middle class and the condition of the novel. But did I, really? Perhaps it would be more correct to say I have looked at the condition of the middle class *as it appears* in the novel. Or, perhaps, at the condition of the novel *of* the middle class.

The question on whether a novel without the middle class exists or *can* exist at all is an intriguing one. This brief conclusion is clearly not the appropriate place to investigate such an important problem, but considering the argument I have exposed in the thesis I am nevertheless inclined to suggest a reformulation of the question: is there a novel after the apocalypse of the middle class? And also: what kind of role can the novel play during the cultural apocalypse of the middle class?

In a transcription of one of his lectures included in *La fine del mondo*, the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino discusses the appearance of the concept of an “apocalypse without eschaton” in modern Western culture. This kind of ‘apocalypse without a climax’ is, De Martino suggests, strictly related to the inability of the middle class to imagine anything after its own existence: the end of the middle class, then, would mean the end of the world, at least (but



most importantly) on a cultural level. This idea of the middle class' inability (or perhaps reluctance?) to conceive of anything after itself is to me particularly fascinating when put in dialogue with the novels I have analyzed. To put it clearly, it induces me to think that what writers like Franzen, Smith, Eggers, or Rooney narrate is, after all, that very apocalypse without eschaton of which Martino talked about. In this sense, the novel would become the vehicle to sing the swan song for what it is perceived to be a dying, collapsing middle class.

But then – assuming that these novels really do this – what would be the reason for me to write about *Normal People* as a possible model for the novel of the future? Why should the novel even *have* a future, if the middle class is slowly disappearing? But even assuming that the middle class is really disappearing – and therefore assuming that this really is the time of the apocalypse without eschaton – would it still be possible to imagine the existence of the novel *after* the middle class? What kind of significance would it have such a literary form when detached from the social group out of which it originated? Would it die out like the epic, and become only the relic of a world that is no more? Or would it be able to reinvent itself, like lyric poetry, and survive in the 'post-apocalyptic' future after the middle class?

Comparing the phenomena of the “eschatological apocalypses of developing countries” and the “apocalypse without eschaton of the West in crisis,” De Martino suggests that

The two kinds of apocalypses ... however different they may be in properties, conditioning and function, share a similar origin in a common situation, that is in the very same threat of dehumanization of the human which characterizes the times to come (84).

This is where I wish to conclude this thesis. With the suggestion – or perhaps the hope – that despite the seemingly unstoppable collapse of the Western middle class, the novel may be

able to endure and survive as an instrument to confront this threat of dehumanization. The 21st century may turn out to be a century without the middle class. But it will still be a century with human beings. It will still be a century that needs humanization. It will still be a century that needs the novel.

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