

Between Normal People: Social irrationality and persistent plot patterns

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This paper argues that Velleman's location of plot patterns "in experiential, proprioceptive, and kinesthetic memory" – that is, in individual bodies – elides the historical and social origins of narrative forms exposed by feminist narratologies (Velleman, 2003, p. 19; Lanser, 2014, p.207). I interrogate this potential problem with Velleman's emotional cadence model of narrative explanation by reading Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) as a contemporary iteration of a plot type from medieval hagiography, the virgin martyr plot (VMP), which has persisted across English-language fiction from Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747) through to Rooney's *Normal People*, not only as a feeling pattern but as a plot structure with a consistent event sequence and character types. While accepting Velleman's characterisation of narrative causation as potentially irrational, I argue that Lévi-Strauss's (1955) structural analysis of myth provides a framework for understanding how narrative patterns may also be stored socially: that is, between, as well as within, human bodies.

For Levi-Strauss, myths offer an alternative to rational discourse, replacing cultural contradictions that "cannot be solved" rationally with a structural logic that allows social cosmology to withstand negation by experience (1955, p. 434). Animated by such contradictions, the VMP follows a consistent pattern: female rebellion against illegitimate masculine authority, torturous sexual test, and transformation through martyrdom and union with a legitimately authoritative, exemplary man, thus reestablishing the patriarchal order initially ruptured (Heffernan, 1988; Winstead, 1989).

A close reading of *Normal People* (Rooney, 2018) shows that it fulfils this plot pattern, while also subjecting its virgin martyr figure, Marianne, to multiple iterations of the sexual test – tests of sexual initiation, sexual violence and sexual sadomasochism – delaying the turn of the plot towards its final, recuperative element. This repetition of the central element of the plot highlights the irrationality of the sexual test as a hinge between female rebellion and union with an exemplary man, while grounding this irrationality in contemporary social realities: for example, that strangulation has become commonplace in young people's sexual practices (Sharman, 2025), while structural inequities like the gendered pay gap remain (Commonwealth of Australia, 2024). The irrationality of the plot pattern, in other words, is simultaneously structural and mimetic, and this simultaneity ties the emotional cadence of the novel to its narrative irrationality.

Normal People exposes the absurdity of a causal sequence that promises female empowerment through sexual subjugation. However, the persistence of the VMP in English-language fiction indicates that the cultural contradiction it mediates—female excellence straining against patriarchal order and turning on sexual violence—remains a live tension. Velleman's emotion-centric model of irrational narrative explanation does not account for the longevity of this plot pattern as a causal and emotional sequence. Any complete theory of narrative explanation must show how plot patterns persist outside as well as within individual bodies, reproduced through enduring social contradictions that generate narrative meaning and emotion precisely because they defy resolution.