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"I'm Anti Love as Such." Female Friendship in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends.*

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INTRODUCTION

In the 2017 novel *Conversations with Friends* by Irish author Sally Rooney, one of the central themes is female friendship. To the protagonist Frances, the relation to her best friend and ex-girlfriend Bobbi is the primary relationship – crucial to her searching for identity and her pursuit of happiness. Besides sharing interests and values, the two of them perform spoken word poetry together – a common project which is both a mirror of their friendship and a personal space, created in opposition to main-stream society, where they can negotiate their friendship. Through their art, they literally create themselves a place and raise their voices in public, and by giving their friendship primacy over normative relations, they challenge patriarchal society as well as the heterosexual norm.

Hailed as a voice of the Millennial generation and marketed as a "Salinger for the Snapchat generation," Sally Rooney has been loved by readers and praised by critics, many of whom have used the term Bildungsroman – or coming of age-novel – to describe her debut *Conversations with Friends* (Donnelly, 2019; Maughan, 2017; Marcus, 2019; Thomas-Corr, 2017).

However, to consider this story as merely a depiction of how a 21-year-old woman grows to maturity may disguise the norm-criticism embedded in it, and under-estimate the potency and importance of female friendship in the novel. Certainly, Frances' personal development – emotional and artistic - puts her and Bobbi's affinity under pressure. The solution, however, is not to comply with the norms, devaluing their friendship in favour of a heterosexual relationship, enacted in the novel through Frances' affair with the 32-year-old, married actor Nick. Instead, Frances needs to re-negotiate her friendship with Bobbi and re-define their relation. As it turns out, their friendship is resilient enough to endure the shifts in circumstances and relations, including the interruption that heterosexual love constitutes, and generous enough to allow other emotional ties and desires.

Departing from this recognition of human relations, this essay will argue that in this novel, the process of shaping one's identity takes place in relation to, and in dialogue with, friends, rather than through individualistic self-fulfilment or by establishing a static, often hetero-normative, relation to one significant other. The most important conversations in *Conversations with Friends*, thus, are those between friends.

The essay is divided into two chapters. The first chapter gives an account of important theories of friendship, most of which are focused on female friendship from a feminist point of view. The second chapter consists of an analysis of the novel, read against the previously mentioned theories.

CHAPTER ONE

Praised by critics as well as readers, *Conversations with Friends* has received accolades for its depiction of young, urban people in an era of globalized communication and economies. Although the portrayals of the main characters and their relations are considered nuanced and sensitive, most critics have first and foremost drawn attention to Sally Rooney's ability to depict the so-called Millennials, familiar with the internet and modern technology, and indifferent to religion and traditions. From an Irish perspective, Rooney's novel is often read as a comment on the Post-Crash Era, or Post-Celtic Tiger Era – the economic recession following the 2008 global financial crisis– and its consequences for the lives of young people.

Some critics have highlighted the feminist theme and the novel's negotiations of women's condition in a heteronormative, neoliberal society. However, even though Madeleine Gray (2020) notes the importance of the friendship between Frances and Bobbi, calling it the novel's "interpersonal crux" (78), no study has focused on female friendship as a major theme of *Conversations with Friends*.

In real life, friendship is often treated as secondary to love. Similarly, in literature, film, music and other cultural manifestations, it is often overshadowed or outperformed by the romantic (usually hetero-sexual) relationship. Some theoreticians have, nonetheless, attended to the theme of friendship – not least female ones, often from a feminist perspective – some of whose research will be discussed in this chapter.

To start with, a summary is given of the psychoanalytic feminist Nancy Chodorow's ideas on how gender roles and unequal power relations are repeated; this is done in order to give a background to the theories that will follow. After that, five sections discuss female friendship – and to some extent friendship in general - from different perspectives, including its character and its relation to romantic/sexual love, its potential as political force, depictions in literature and other cultural manifestations, and its relation to male presence. Finally, the chapter includes a brief summary of Helene Cixous' conception of woman's position in relation to male hegemony and her possibilities to re-define herself independently, emphasizing women's written and oral language – an important motif in *Conversations with Friends*. Despite different approaches to the subject matter, what unites most of the theories represented here is the notion of friendship as a potentially subversive political force. Not only does it represent an alternative way of living on an individual level; by refusing to conform to the norm, friendship bonds may challenge the prevailing societal order.

1. Female Friendship as Secondary to Heterosexual Love

When discussing the power relation between women and men, many feminist thinkers have focused on the traditional family, not seldom drawing upon psychoanalytic theory. One such scholar is Nancy Chodorow who, inspired by Freud, explains the asymmetrical power balance between the sexes by referring to parenthood/early childhood.

As Chodorow suggests, since women, in most cultures, are the primary care givers for children, girls and boys are raised differently, preparing them for different roles as adults. While boys are encouraged to adopt classic masculine qualities, getting ready to perform an economic role in society, girls learn to nurture and be sensitive to the feelings of others. As a consequence, the bond between mother and daughter becomes stronger and emotionally more intense than the connection between mother and son (Abel, 417).

As grown-ups, Chodorow argues, women yearn to recreate the intimacy they as children experienced in relation to their mothers. Hetero-sexual love, however, does not completely meet these needs. Most women therefore find, according to Chodorow, men "erotically primary but emotionally secondary" (Abel, 417-418), and, because of patterns established in childhood, neither interested in nor capable of the intense sentiments. This also explains why female friendships tend to have certain qualities; they are “affectively richer than men’s” (Chodorow 1978, 200, quoted by Raymond, 42).

Regardless of its affective richness, female friendship is not, Chodorow claims, a viable replacement due to “internal and external taboos on homosexuality” as well as “women's isolation from their primary female kin (especially mothers) and other women” (Abel, 418). Furthermore, societal forces restrain women from abandoning the nuclear family; given that the system structurally and economically subordinates women, it is “rational” for women “to give primacy to hetero-relations” (Raymond, 42). Instead, it is motherhood that offers compensation; mothering a child, a woman recreates the warmth and closeness from her own early years.

Thus, psychological needs and human emotions contribute to the reiteration and the conservation of gender roles and women’s subordination. To stifle these mechanisms, Chodorow suggests an equal distribution of domestic work and childcare between woman and man. On this point, however, she has been criticized by more radical feminists for running errands for the patriarchy; the moderate reformation she advocates idealizes hetero-relations and will only work for maintaining and reinforcing them as an institution (Raymond, 44, 46).

Furthermore, critics claim that Chodorow, although she acknowledges the qualities of female bonds, underestimates the potency of female friendship as a force that may satisfy women’s desire for emotional intimacy (Abel, 1981; Raymond, 1986; Rich, 1980).

2. Passion and Resistance to Male Oppression

In contrast to Nancy Chodorow, the critics Adrienne Rich and Janice Raymond see a huge and underestimated potentiality in female friendship and are strong proponents for its re-evaluation and upgradation.

Adrienne Rich wrote in 1979 that “the connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet” (Rich, 1979). To her, female friendship is a part of a larger pattern, for which she has coined the term “lesbian continuum” (Rich, 1980: 27), and which comprises not only lesbianism or female homosexuality as such, but “many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (27). The notion “lesbian continuum” infers that female homosexuality should not be considered essentially different from other forms of strong feelings and affinities between women; it is rather a difference in gradation or intensity. However, all manifestations of the lesbian continuum – from homosexual marriage-like relationships to friendship – equally threaten the hegemonic society and have consequently, according to Rich, been subdued throughout history: “crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise” (13).

Heterosexuality, Rich argues, is not a natural preference or a biological fact; it is an institution imposed on women by different means – hence the term compulsory heterosexuality - and which constitutes the foundation of the society. The purpose of this rigorous system– ranging from legislation to media imagery - is to ensure men access to women for reproductional and economic reasons. Women are thus the “emotional and sexual property of men” (12), and if they refuse to conform to that role, they threaten family, religion, and state (11). Living within the norm, women will continue to be (in most societies) economically dependent on men – and available to them for childbearing and unpaid domestic labour. In this way, the capitalist system is provided with a work force that is cared for at home – and reproduces itself. There are thus strong incentives to suppress all expressions of the lesbian continuum, which– according to Rich - explains why lesbians have been eradicated from history (including history of literature) and made invisible in many areas.

Similarly, there is reason to suppress also other forms of female bonding, which is why economic, religious, cultural and societal institutions collaborate to prevent women from gaining too much independence. Nevertheless, Rich states, women have always put up resistance, on a smaller or larger scale, against the oppressive system, from supporting each other to cooperating for political ends.

Critique has been raised against Rich, on the one hand for diminishing lesbianism when allegedly equating it with a general, non-sexual "passion" between women, and on the other hand for conjuring a too romanticized image of female friendship and coexistence. However, for one thing, Rich admits that women's relations are not unproblematic, but can contain "anger as well as (…) love, or (…) that intense mixture of the two" (16). Moreover, neither objection devalues Rich's main point, that there is an immense societal pressure on women (and men) to live heterosexually to sustain the prevailing order.

There are similarities between Rich's lesbian continuum and what Janice Raymond calls Gyn/affection, and which she defines as "woman-to-woman attraction, influence, and movement" (Raymond, 37). To a large extent, it is a synonym to female friendship. However, it does not only include the private aspects, but also the political ones (37-38). The essence of Gyn/affection is demonstrated with a quote from Virginia Woolf: "Only women stir me to action and power" (Raymond, 38). This passion is a force working for the survival of woman, whereas its opposite, hetero-relations – or hetero-reality – maintains her subordination (37-38).

Like Rich, Raymond subscribes to the idea that heterosexuality is not an intrinsic preference, but what women and girls (and possibly men) are coerced into. There are strong expectations that "every woman's most meaningful and most satisfying relations are with men" (38), while friendship between women is regarded as "second-rate, insignificant and/or as a prelude to hetero-maturity" (38).

According to Raymond, feminist ideas such as Chodorow's merely contribute to maintaining the system by confirming the heterosexual norm. Instead of trying to reform patriarchy by redistributing workload, Raymond promotes female solidarity and cooperation – "the far greater liberating potential of Gyn/affection where women turn to our Selves and each other for empowerment, rather than once more seeking help from men" (47).

3. "Merging" – a Wish to Become One

Another perspective on female friendship concerns the way it in general is depicted. According to Elizabeth Abel (1981), friendship is indeed a frequent topic in women's literature, albeit a topic that many feminist critics, obsessed with the mother-daughter relation, have neglected (413). However, Abel notes, friendship tends not to be the main theme, but is, particularly in popular main-stream culture, often used as a backdrop, or as narrative strategy: "a device for exploring the differing trajectories of women's lives" (415). As a consequence, the differences between the female characters are emphasized; what they seek in each other is complementarity.

In "serious novels" (415), on the contrary, female friendship is depicted as built on identification and strong emotions. This is illustrated with the feelings Lily Briscoe harbours for Mrs Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse:* pondering over her desire for Mrs Ramsay, Lily expresses a wish to become "inextricably the same, one with the object one adored," and to achieve "unity" (Abel, 415-416).

This wish to "merge" with the other is, according to Abel, characteristic of female friendship and is explained by the psychological mechanisms described by Nancy Chodorow. In contrast to Chodorow, however, Abel suggests that female bonding may indeed fulfil the grown-up woman's yearning for closeness, since it provides possibilities to "relax ego boundaries and restore psychic wholeness" (418). Particularly beneficent is identification with a female friend who is “either older or wiser” (418), implying a replacement of the lost relation to the mother.

4. Independence Replacing Identification

Not all female friend relations contain strong feelings of identification or passion; sometimes they are characterized by tolerance and distance – or by competition, even sheer hostility. Judith Taylor has taken pains to disprove the alleged general idea that women are naturally competent in socializing and collaborating (Taylor, 2013). Highlighting competitiveness and practices close to bullying in autobiographies drawing on the social patterns within feminist circles, Taylor refutes characterizations of the energizing and empowering solidarity among females: “Disturbing to Rich's idealized vision is that questions of interpersonal cruelty, fear, isolation, and betrayal remain quite fierce—in the absence of men” (2013: 108).

However, when instead analysing fictional females in Zadie Smith’s novel *NW* and Mariko Tamaki's graphic novel *Skim* (Taylor, 2016), Taylor finds yet another aspect of female friendship. In these literary works, published 2012 and 2008, respectively, the passionate and intimate feelings are absent; friendship is not seen as a way to “salvation” (468). Neither do the female friends seek to complement each other (nor do they engage in bullying).

Instead, Smith and Tamaki represent a new tendency, Taylor argues, when they delineate friendships that are more allowing, and also less demanding, and where each party is also self-reliant enough to be generous toward the other. Identification and emotional intensity are replaced by a certain distance. With this integrity follows a tolerance to differences, which are considered enriching – “a genuine source of gratifying observation or admiration” (458).

5. Creativity and Experimentation Outside the Norm

The element of distance and respect between friends, which Taylor finds in Smith and Tamaki, is a reminder of how male friendship is usually conceived. In Classical Antiquity, friendship relations were held in high esteem; however, this noble companionship was reserved for males (Garlick, 564), and by implication *free* men. Tellingly, the Greek word *philia*, used to distinguish friendship from other kinds of love, is often translated “brotherly love” (Wikipedia).

The ideal of retaining some distance between friends is also present in the influential German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s thoughts on the ideal confidant, who offers perspective on one’s own life and person, and thus a potential for change. To achieve this, a degree of distance is required, and Nietzsche in accordance describes a friend as a person who “must not want to see everything” (Garlick, 559).

This Nietzschean ideal is to some extent echoed in modern pictures of male friendship as, in general, somewhat bristly and lacking in commitment: “obligatory camaraderie” as Michel Foucault calls it (Foucault/Rabinow, 136). In his works on friendship, Foucault uses homosexuality as his key example. Like Adrienne Rich, who claims that the heterosexual institution counteracts (female) friendship, he connects the lost status of *philia* to a “heterosexist culture” and “hegemonic discourses of masculinity” (Garlick, 570). But in contrast to Rich, Foucault conceives of life outside the norm as a possibility for creativity and experimentation with relations.

Furthermore, Foucault is reluctant to distinguish between friendship and romantic love, which leads one’s thoughts to the continuum Rich uses. Still, he makes a difference between sexual acts and desires, on the one hand, and emotional ties, on the other hand (Kingston, 10). Consequently, he is prone to align with the idea of a dichotomy between body and mind, between sex and friendship, as opposed to Rich who wants to include all manifestations of strong feelings – sexual or not – in the same notion.

Rich and Foucault are, however, on common ground when it comes to the potential of friendship. Although Rich speaks exclusively about women, and Foucault can be assumed to refer mainly to men, both of them conceive of friendship as an alliance free from regulations imposed by state, religion, culture or social norms. While romantic love is surrounded by a massive frame of expectations, ceremonies and laws, friendship has the benefit of not being institutionalized. In the untrodden fields, there is place and space for experimentation with political implications. Foucault considers non-normative relations as "localised resistance to social normalization" (Kingston, 15), as well as a "challenge to the normalisation of relationships" (Kingston, 12). Since there is a mutual dependence – social relations are regulated by the system, but also underpin it – innovative constructions of relationships per se undermine the prevailing order. In the same spirit, Rich considers the fellowship woman-to-woman as presenting resistance against the governing heterosexual institution.

6. Male Presence as Disruption

Whereas Foucault's perspective is androcentric or possibly gender-neutral, Rich, Raymond, Abel and Taylor discuss the potential of connections between women exclusively. Thus, friendship theory to a large extent focuses on same-sex relations. However, Maria Lopez and Gerardo Rodríguez Salas touch upon mixed-sex (non-romantic) relations when they examine what male presence implies for female friendship (2015).

Comparing depictions of female friendship in works by the authors Katharine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf, they find diverging, not to say opposing, views. In Mansfield, the female characters seldom succeed in connecting on a deeper level, despite their efforts. The obstacle is often male presence which “works as a disruptive and destructive intrusion that prevents women from inventing alternative relations to prevailing hetero-reality” (19).

In contrast to Mansfield’s “ultimate pessimism about sisterhood” (21), Virginia Woolf is well-known for her portrayals of passionate and empowering friendship bonds between women. In addition, there is a wider repertoire of constellations in her fiction, allowing male characters to be involved in various ways – sometimes as “friends, recipients or agents” (19), sometimes as forces hampering or obstructing female bonding.

When summarizing what impact men have on women’s interrelations, Lopez & Salas conclude that “bonds between female friends are never depicted as independent of, or impervious to, male presence” (19).

7. Defying Patriarchy Through Writing

In her seminal essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975, trans 1976), Hélène Cixous exhorts women to refuse to comply with the patriarchal system – and instead find their own way, not in relation or opposition to, but independent of, male hegemony.

Women have throughout history been suppressed by being deprived of their bodies, including the right to sexual pleasures, and it is, Cixous argues, time to “rethink womankind,” starting from the body (882). A woman need not fulfil heterosexual expectations nor be confined by conventionality but is free to love and live with whomever she wishes, in whatever constellation she wishes. “We are all Lesbians,” Cixous exclaims in an act of acknowledging all female sexual and emotional expressions as equally valuable (882).

To reconquer themselves, Cixous argues that women must express themselves – in speech and, in particular, in written language, since writing is “precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (879). However, instead of appropriating the tools of the male tradition, women should create a new, feminine writing, *écriture feminine*, that ignores norms constructed by men. Writing thus becomes a tool for women to distance themselves from the prevailing order – i.e. patriarchy – and refuse to be defined by it.

Inspired by psychoanalysis, Cixous considers woman's ability to carry a baby and give birth as crucial; regardless of whether she decides to have children or not, she has an innate aptitude for caring for others. In this matter there is consensus between Cixous and Chodorow, who also sees the (possibility of) motherhood as a distinctive and defining feature of femininity. Unlike Chodorow, however, Cixous does not regard motherhood as imperative to re-experience the original intimacy. Instead, she promotes solidarity and acceptance between women to resist the male strategy of divide and rule; women have been led by men "to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves" (878). Nonetheless, Cixous's ideas represent a fundamentally individualistic approach, encouraging woman's freedom of choice – and freedom from the logic constructed by men, "the infamous logic of antilove" (878).

In the following chapter, these different ideas on friendship and love will be applied in the analysis of the protagonist Frances and her way of finding her own individual voice and – at the same time – constructing relations while escaping the pressure and the expectations from society.

CHAPTER TWO

The prominence of the friendship theme in *Conversations with Friends* is underpinned not only by its title, but also by its form. In this first-person narrative, the introductory words of the first chapter– "Bobbi and I" (3) – immediately introduce the narrator's confidant and construct them as a team. In addition, the structure of the novel mirrors the condition of the friendship in that its division into two parts coincides with a watershed in the relation between Frances and Bobbi. Worried when not finding Frances asleep in her bed on their last night in Étables, Bobbi knocks on Nick's door and thereby finds out about the secret relation (160). When Part Two starts, only hours have passed, and the mood is strained between the two travel companions heading back home to Ireland. Rooney even gives a new marker of time, as if something is beginning anew: "It was late August. In the airport Bobbi asked me: how long has that been going on for, between the two of you? And I told her. She shrugged like, okay." (163). The implications of Frances' non-disclosure – perceived as a breach against the unwritten rules of their close friendship – are important enough to justify a division of the entire narrative.

In what follows, the friendship theme in the novel will be examined, beginning in the first section with an analysis of how the artistic collaboration provides a sanctuary for experimentation with identity and relationship. The second section is dedicated to language and its significance for Frances' self-development. The third section analyses the novel's depiction of masculinity in relation to femininity and female friendship. And, finally, the last section shows how the protagonist, in her conception of life as a network of relations extending over time and outside norms, creates her own identity – in concordance with a re-negotiated female friendship.

1. Becoming One: Poetry as a Sanctuary

Frances and Bobbi's spoken word poetry is central to the novel; it constitutes a separate realm where friendship and identity are being negotiated and reflected. Under the cover of performative art, there is room for the feelings captured by Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum and Janice Raymond's Gyn/affection; here Frances in particular can fulfil her desire to dissolve the borders between her and her best friend – to "become one," as described by Elizabeth Abel. Furthermore, created by themselves for their own purposes, their collaboration becomes the space Foucault promoted as ideal for experimentation with relations, an alternative reality, separate from the normative society.

In general, poetry is considered as a genre where deeply personal feelings are expressed; no difference is made between work and person. Consequently, it is in that respect an individualistic genre; in *Conversations with Friends*, however, poetry is used as a means for Frances to disguise or diffuse her identity – to construct a collective. Being the sole originator, she nonetheless abstains from the opportunity to profile herself as the author, bolstering her ego. Instead, she insists on presenting the project as a joint effort, even denying the actual circumstances on a direct question from Melissa. To the reader, however, Frances confesses: "I was lying. Except in the sense of enriching my life, Bobbi didn't help me write the poetry" (12).

It is not only modesty or political views (Frances is allegedly a communist) that motivates her approach; marketing themselves and performing as a duo, the borders between her own and Bobbi's person are dissolved, and they are regarded as an artistic unity. This is an example of how the will to merge, as described by Elizabeth Abel, is represented in Frances' relation to Bobbi.

On stage, Frances nevertheless allows a certain distinction between them, letting Bobbi be the one who excels as – according to Frances - the "superior performer" (12-13). Also, she describes how she while performing follows Bobbi and tries to “tune in to her particular rhythm” (36). The division of roles in their artistic work mirrors them off stage; Frances is the more reclusive person, while her friend is an extrovert personality. Described as an aggressively political rebel in school (7), Bobbi – when they befriend each other as teenagers – brings in the creativity, the action and the joy to Frances’ up until then dull life. In fact, she affords Frances with “the first real fun” she ever had and becomes her first friend ever as well as her first love (8). As young adults studying at university in Dublin, Bobbi is perhaps slightly less aggressive, but still politically interested, now combining it with a savoir vivre and social skills that open the door to new possibilities. So Bobbi is the one who initially connects with the journalist Melissa, an acquaintance which will have personal implications for all of them. Melissa, moreover, portrays the two poetry performers in a magazine, earning them a name as (local) artists.

In contrast to Frances, Bobbi comes from an affluent family, making her way through life with the solid self-confidence of the privileged, however never too posh to socialize with the butcher or the book shop cashier (192, 203-204). In a way, she is Frances’ guide into the young cultural and intellectual community of Dublin. And Frances, painfully aware of her dependence on her friend, notes the difference: “I didn’t belong in rich people’s houses. I was only ever invited to places like that because of Bobbi, who belonged everywhere and had a quality about her that made me invisible by comparison” (60).

It may, thus, be a feeling of inferiority that spurs an admiration – or even jealousy – in Frances; Bobbi holds economic, social as well as cultural capital – that sense of belonging everywhere – all of which Frances lacks. And, certainly, there is admiration; when reading the Bible, she even imagines Jesus as speaking with Bobbi’s voice (205). However, Frances’ desire for Bobbi is not merely a will to befriend a high-status person with a seemingly striking personality; they also share an interest in politics and philosophy, and are constantly engaged in vigorous discussions, not seldom in the form of written digital conversations. Further, they seem to share values, although Bobbi is as always the more radical one, leaving the college feminist society in protest while Frances, though agreeing with Bobbi's opinions, remains a member (63). Their exchanges often contain negotiations of their personal qualities and set of values, as for example when they discuss love in relation to capitalism. Frances finishes by claiming that she is "anti love as such," to which Bobbi replies: "that's vapid Frances," "you have to do more than say that you're anti things" (180). In this sense, they are bettering each other by offering each other perspective on one's self, in the way that Nietzsche was a proponent for (Garlick). Moreover, these discussions contribute to creating a mutual understanding and identification; they share "a rich inner life" (Rich).

At times, identification is more than a sense of understanding or belonging together. Also in Bobbi's absence, Frances constantly relates to her: "I tried stamping my feet as loudly as I could to distract myself from bad thoughts, but people gave me curious looks and I felt cowed. I knew that was weak of me. Bobbi was never cowed by strangers" (51-52). In her presence, Frances persistently pays attention to Bobbi, and makes seemingly irrelevant, almost pointless, observations: "Bobbi sat in the middle, with her head turned to speak to Melissa, so I could see the back of her neck and her little spoon-like ear" (3). Similarly, in France, she observes Bobbi walking ahead of her: "Illuminated by passing headlights I saw she had her hands down in the pockets of her raincoat and was splashing along through the puddles" (153). When looking at photographs of them both on her screen, Frances zooms in on Bobbi's face "until I could see the pixilation" (9). These close, almost obsessive, observations, reveal admiration and a yearning for her friend, which is so strong that it at times manifests as a wish to literally *be* Bobbi: "Sometimes when I was doing something dull, like walking home from work or hanging up laundry, I liked to imagine that I looked like Bobbi. (…) The pretence was so real to me that when I accidentally caught sight of my reflection and saw my own appearance, I felt a strange, depersonalizing shock" (14). Indeed, the almost self-effacing feelings have similarities with romantic love or an early-stage infatuation; however, they can also be considered as examples of what is covered by the lesbian continuum, Gyn/affection as well as the desire to "merge" that according to Elizabeth Abel is characteristic for female friendships. These notions are the more relevant since there is also an element of sexual tension or desire between the two ex-girlfriends.

Years after they have broken up – on Bobbi's initiative – their friendship is occasionally interrupted by the erotic passion surfacing and expressing itself. Again, it is Bobbi's initiative when they kiss in Étables (153), and outside the café (256). Frances does not object; although a bit bewildered by the sudden outbursts of erotic attraction, she seems to be wishing for more. From a hetero-normative point of view, the fluidity and the elusiveness of their relationship is difficult to define. Read instead against the theories of Raymond, Foucault and not least Rich, the quality of their relationship can, on the contrary, be viewed as manifesting a wide range of passion between women.

Although the lesbian continuum and Gyn/affection are more allowing as notions, relationship constructions that fall outside the norm still entail personal complications or confusion. Certainly, Bobbi seems to accommodate more easily to the loose definition. When briefly resuming their romantic relation, it is she who denies them being a couple: "Calling myself your girlfriend would be imposing some prefabricated cultural dynamic on us that's outside our control" (306). This is in line with her ideological view; monogamy, Bobbi contends, serves "the needs of men in patrilinear societies by allowing them to pass property to their genetic offspring, traditionally facilitated by sexual entitlement to a wife" (252).

In contrast to the self-confident Bobbi, Frances is less certain on her standpoint and, as the events unfold with emotional entanglements, she will be forced to examine her own self as well as her relation to others.

A central part in the self-image she has constructed is the conception of herself as dependent on and inferior to Bobbi. Intellectualizing her own insecurity and mediocrity, Frances has made a gimmick out of being a person without personality; still, she ponders the probability of its existence: “I worried that if I turned out to have a personality it would be the unkind one” (176). By contrast, she has a solid self-confidence regarding her intellectual capacity. However, she manages to turn this too to her (social) disadvantage; when reading Gayatri Spivak’s post-colonial theory, she concludes: “I’m going to become so smart that no one will understand me” (94).

Wittily and convincingly, Frances thus describes her own flaws and Bobbi’s extraordinary qualities. However, there are indications that she may be an unreliable narrator; after their first meetings with Melissa & Nick, she and Bobbi have diverging versions of the dynamics between the two spouses. In Frances’ description, Nick is ever so patient, showing concern for the dog the first time they visit (5), and on the dinner night calmly telling it to stop barking (12). Bobbi, for her part, claims that Nick met them with disinterest and also “yelled” at Melissa about their pet (32). This serves as a reminder that *Conversations with Friends* is told strictly from one subjective perspective, that is, Frances’. And through her lens, Bobbi is practically flawless, almost a natural force; according to Frances she has a “ferocious and frightening power over circumstances and people” (228).

Frances may, however, be oblivious to her own influence on and importance to Bobbi. When engaged in heated discussions with other friends, Bobbi frequently turns to Frances for an approving nod (252), indicating that the admiration and dependence go both ways, and that the ever so self-confident Bobbi also needs Frances to corroborate and support her statements. Furthermore, it reveals that Bobbi wants to impress on and be admired by Frances – just like Frances, whenever she gets positive teacher feedback, has the habit of showing it to Bobbi (34).

Frances’ enjoying Bobbi’s demonstration of her rhetorical skills in the café is a parallel to their performances where Frances lets Bobbi stand in the limelight, while assuming a secluded role for herself. Notwithstanding this submissive position, Frances is equally significant to Bobbi– as an intellectual benchmark and as the creative force in their poetry project. The artistic collaboration is, thus, an arena for close cooperation that extends outside the stage, but also a possibility to take on a collective identity, to blur the boundaries between them – to perform as one.

2. Becoming a Self Through Language

The spoken word poetry project further contributes to establish language as an important motif in *Conversations with Friends*. The narrator Frances –tellingly an English literature student – displays throughout the novel a fixation with words from different aspects, graphically as well as semantically. Not only does she observe what font signs are printed in (96), if an e-mail is written in lower case only (61) and/or arranged in paragraphs or not (238); when falling out with Bobbi, her crisis management is to search through their old written instant messenger conversations (179), with the purpose to find evidence that she has once meant something to her friend. Similarly, when Nick sends a text message that makes her feel rejected, she desperately browses through previous correspondence to find tangible remnants of their romance (94).

Furthermore, a major part of the communication in the novel is in written form. Mainly, it takes place on different digital platforms, also when it comes to important ones such as breakups, apologies, declarations of love and ideological discussions. Many of the conversations, which the book’s title alludes to, are digitally written exchanges.

What digital communication may lack compared to face-to-face communication, such as facial and bodily expressions, tone of voice etc, is compensated for by other means;

silences, withholding information and orthography are as important as what is in fact written. Frances interprets text messages not only according to their semantic content, but also according to other factors. Responding to messages, she uses the same instruments; she logs out and lets an hour pass before she replies to Nick's e-mail (61), signalling lack of eagerness. Similarly, she considers the significance of the disposition of Melissa's e-mail – and concludes that it is a means for Melissa to prove herself superior, as writer and as woman. To Melissa's wordy letter, Frances shows another kind of superiority by replying succinctly: "Lots to think about" (239).

Not only written language has a central role in the narrative – in the spoken word poetry project the oral language becomes a means for Frances to re-define herself. Once a schoolgirl spending her time alone, of interest to her classmates only when they could benefit from her by copying her homework (8), Frances through the poetry performance gets the possibility to leave her subdued self behind. When she considers what she is trying to achieve with poetry, she describes the importance of audience response as "the best part" of the performance since it gives a feeling of being "someone worthy of praise, worthy of love". At an occasion where Nick arrives too late to see the performance and only experiences the acclaim, she is still pleased, since this will elevate her status in relation to him; she will feel worthy to speak to him. (41)

The implications of Frances' writing and performing – her personal development, status-elevation and female bonding – can be understood in the light of Héléne Cixous' call for women to break free through expressing themselves. Although Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* was written in another time than *Conversations with Friends*, to consider her ideas obsolete would, nonetheless, be to over-estimate the development on gender equality. In the stratified society of post-crash Ireland, Frances is a representative of the historically oppressed sex. Furthermore, her social background – non-academic, rural – makes subordination by gender enforced by the class aspect. It is therefore indeed relevant to read her artistic expressions as transgression. Integrating speech and writing – and doing so by acting on a stage – Frances both psychologically and physically fulfils what Cixous describes as an act of putting "herself into the text – as into the world and history – by her own movement" (875).

Furthermore, when Frances publishes a text in a literary journal, she takes yet another transgressive step. From her and Bobbi's merged identity she steps forward as an individual voice, symbolizing her growing self-confidence and personal development. Importantly, however, the subject matter of this first solo work is the love for her best friend – again confirming Bobbi's importance.

Incidentally (or perhaps deliberately), Frances' lover Nick is also a performing artist. A white, hetero-sexual middle-aged urban man, wealthy both by birth and by achievement, Nick represents the antithesis of Frances in several aspects. It is therefore significant that while she performs her own original works in bars and clubs together with her best friend, Nick is part of a professional ensemble at the national theatre. Seeing him on stage in the classic *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Frances notes that he speaks "in an unrecognisably different voice" (29). This contributes to an estrangement; he is not using his own voice, not speaking his mind, but merely performing a given role, separate from himself in time and character, in which he does not have to invest himself. In comparison, Frances as an artist is original and authentic in the sense that she writes and recites with her own unique voice, albeit performed in collaboration with Bobbi.

Informed by Cixous, a reading of Nick and Frances' respective artistic expressions construes the female as the avantgarde artist, expressing herself in an innovative way – indeed putting herself "into the world (…) by her own movement" (Cixous, 875). The male, on the contrary, re-enacts and reiterates a scripted role from the male-dominated history – the "locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, (…) often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction” (879).

3. Masculinity as Irrelevant and Interruptive

In the shadow of the differing, multi-faceted representations of femininity in *Conversations with Friends*, masculinity on the whole is depicted as a power on its way to losing its relevance.

Beside the vague and impressionable Nick, the most frequently recurring male characters are the sympathetic friend Philip, appreciatingly described by Bobbi as “wussy and effeminate” (Rooney, 83), and Dennis, Frances’ unreliable father, mostly present through his mysterious absence. About the latter, Clair Kilroy notes in her review that *Conversations with Friends* certainly includes the “stalwart of Irish writing, the alcoholic father,” though in Rooney’s version banished to the marginal – “a spent force” (Kilroy, 2017). Further, there is Jerry, Bobbi’s affluent father, described as “temperamental” (Rooney, 255), who, it is suggested, is incapable of handling a divorce in a mature way. Yet another minor male character is Derek, friend of Melissa and Nick’s, who is provoked by the radical young women, in particular Bobbi, and ridicules her progressive ideas: “don’t tell me animal rights extend to moths now, do they?” (127).

There are, in addition, some sketchy representations of masculinity; characters who are tone-deafly intrusive or openly hostile, always hetero-normative. In the utility room at Melissa’s birthday party, Frances’ entrance provokes sexual innuendo from the gathered (much older) men (55-56). They more or less instantly start to emphasize her otherness on the basis of gender, age and origin. To their question about what county’s sports team she favours – with the ulterior motive to expose her ignorance – Frances responds with a nod to Virginia Woolf: “As a woman I have no county” (57). Probably wasted on the addressees – Frances’ answer nonetheless shows her reluctance, even obstinacy, to comply with the game rules of patriarchy. When choosing between, on the one hand, admitting to support (or pretending to support) a team and, on the other hand, confessing her ignorance, she creates a third option and proclaims, on the basis of her gender, the right to not participate in the game. In addition, she does this by invoking a tradition of female literary writing.

Equally intrusive is the man Frances as a teenager chats with on the internet. In pursuit of some kind of fellowship or community, she has a conversation with a 26-year-old American who suddenly sends her a "dick pic," convinced that she shares his fascination for his genitals (35). Similarly, when late at night walking home from a bar, Frances notes in passing that "[a] drunk man yelled that he loved me" (41). In their simplicity, these are examples of how males assume heterosexuality as well as interest from young females.

Altogether, the gender representations conjure a picture of a masculinity that, threatened by reinventive and non-normative femininity, is unimaginatively and desperately repeating itself. In contrast to Lopez & Salas' conclusion, that male presence has a tendency to hamper female bonding, masculinity in *Conversations with Friends* in general is too irrelevant, and male characters are too marginal, to even interfere with the female friendship. There is however one exception to the rule: the non-stereotype male character Nick.

Certainly, Nick in many ways epitomizes the "hetero-reality" that Frances and Bobbi oppose; he is a white, bourgeois, heterosexual man, with a quite successful career in a creative high-status profession, an equally successful wife, and a beautiful house in a posh neighbourhood. In addition, he is described as having a classical masculine attractiveness; there is even a fan web site dedicated to him, albeit an out-of-date one.

Contrary to stereotypes, however, he as a person is no conventional alpha-male. From the start, it is clear that Melissa is the driving force in their marriage, with Nick passively and obediently following. Frances and Bobbi even jokingly refer to him as Melissa's "trophy husband" (12), reversing a sexist stereotype. His weak-willed and compliant personality is captured by Melissa, when she describes him as "pathologically submissive" and claims that he "compulsively tells people what they want to hear" (234).

Nick's tendency to agree with and please people is also demonstrated in the novel. When Frances explains that she wants to "destroy capitalism," Nick claims that he is "basically a Marxist" (75). Later, however, among old friends at the villa in Brittany, it turns out that he has not always been politically progressive: "Yeah, Nick, you used to love the police state, Melissa said. What happened?" (113).

Furthermore, Melissa and her friends treat Nick like a delicate person, someone whose condition is anxiously discussed in his absence; to some extent this is reminiscent of adults' care and concern for a troubled child. Eventually, it is revealed that he has been struggling with psychiatric illness (238) – in no way evidence of weakness, but neither traditionally associated with masculinity.

Despite her introverted personality, it is Frances who initiates the romance when kissing Nick for the first time (58). And Frances is henceforth the more active party, making sure the relation progresses. For instance, she suggests she may come over when she knows he is alone at home for a couple of days – and schemingly brings her toothbrush (69). Again, Nick is compliant; not unwilling nor uninterested, but definitely not insistent. Frances also notes that she is the one initiating all expressions of affection between them (76-77).

Part emblematic of male privilege, part unconventionally weak and passive – it is perhaps unexpected that Nick represents the only male character with a power to disrupt the female bonding in *Conversations with Friends*. It is Frances' affair with him that indirectly drives a wedge between her and Bobbi. Him being the husband of their friend Melissa, Frances for obvious reasons is secretive about the affair. She struggles not mainly with the fact that she goes behind Melissa's back, but with the fact that she does not tell Bobbi. At times she feels “deceitful” (62), and she imagines how the conversations would unfold if she revealed the secret (64). As Frances anticipates, Bobbi getting to know about the affair actually causes a crisis between them.

Being interested in ideology and politics, Bobbi is inclined to explain also private matters in political terms. Thus, depression is, according to Bobbi, a “humane response to the conditions of late capitalism” (124), and love is “both antithetical to capitalism, (…) and yet it’s also subservient and facilitatory” (180). Already when she suspects Frances is infatuated with Nick, she bursts out that she had expected Frances to fall in love with an “effeminate” man would it at all be a man (83). Similarly, there is a political dimension to her silent indignation over Frances’ de facto affair with Nick. Not that Bobbi has moralistic objections to an extra-marital affair per se, but it is obvious that she feels rejected by her best friend: “you tell him more than you tell me” (179), Bobbi complains. Apart from hurting Bobbi’s feelings on a personal and emotional level, it is to some extent an ideological deceit; a traditional romantic affair threatens to be given primacy over the female solidarity. That Frances does not confide in Bobbi – the secret relation is exposed by coincidence –is thus a breach of the friendship contract, with both personal and political implications.

So, although Nick is not such a traditional man, as Bobbi first concludes, he still represents the establishment and male power. Frances getting involved with him could consequently be understood as a capitulation to hetero-reality. This would entail that the relation to Bobbi is diminished to a pubertal phase marked by experimentation and searching for identity – or seen as a “prelude to hetero-maturity” (Raymond, 38) – and could, consequently, explain Bobbi’s political disappointment and her feelings of exclusion or betrayal. Instead, however, Nick’s presence provokes a renegotiation of the friendship as well as a self-examination for Frances’ part.

4. Frances' Choice: A Complex Network

What spurs Frances to approach Nick initially is not so much an irresistible desire, as it is a distraction, or a compensation, when feeling excluded by Bobbi and Melissa's nascent friendship. Developing the acquaintance with Nick becomes a way to compete; having seen him perform at the theatre is, to Frances, an advantage: "because I had seen the play I was party to something Bobbi didn't know about" (32).

In Nick she meets a person whose relationship to some extent mirrors her own relation to Bobbi: he is the passive party vis-à-vis Melissa. In contrast to Bobbi and Melissa's outgoing, even dominant, personalities, Frances and Nick are the more composed ones. In her relationship to Nick - within the limitations that his marital status entails - Frances then gets a new role as the more active force.

At the same time, Frances is ambivalent to the affair and to Nick, which is manifested in her attitude to him oscillating between being recalcitrant and contact seeking. "I liked him but he didn't need to know that" (119), she concludes to herself. One reason for her ambivalence is her discomfort when it comes to expressing feelings; she prefers to hide behind her intelligence and her wit. The image that she has cultivated of herself is the image of a person who is intellectually capable and emotionally detached – an attitude she also employs towards her family and in particular her father, whom she insists on treating like "just another normal person rather than my personal distinguished benefactor, or a minor celebrity" (175). What Frances as a teenager wrote in her diary – "As a feminist I have the right not to love anyone" (176) – seems to still be valid. With hesitation and reluctance, thus, Frances realizes that what she supposed was going to be a pastime is actually evolving into a real emotional commitment.

Furthermore, Frances is struggling with conflicting ideals. Nick being a representative for the hetero-normative society, Frances – who conceives of masculinity as "personally oppressive” (75) – reflexively wants to defy him and is reluctant to ascribe him too much importance. This ideological dimension is moreover entangled with the emotional aspect. Her closest confidant, Bobbi, represents a non-normative approach to life – *and* passion, intimacy and fellowship. To her own bewilderment, Frances discovers that she nurtures a hope for an exclusiveness in the relation to Nick – only to immediately establish that the wish is “outlandish” since she still desires Bobbi (277).

Being in love with her male lover as well as with her best female friend, Frances indeed stands at a crossroads. In contrast to thousands and thousands of narratives, the protagonist in *Conversations with Friends* refuses to choose one of two alternatives; instead, she eventually creates her own way.

Certainly, during the course of the novel, Frances has to make concessions to her high ideals. Although she has declared that she has no intention to “perform an economic role” (23), she capitulates to economic realities and gets herself a part-time job; in fact, she even feels a sting of jealousy in the end when Philip is offered an employment in the literary agency where they both have been interns (306). She falters in her anti-establishment attitude to life; the lures of bourgeoisie life – the electric coffee grinder, fresh avocado, the posh house (74, 76) – become irresistible even to Frances. And despite her self-proclaimed callousness, she eventually has to admit she harbors strong feelings, not only of sexual/romantic character; even her family gets recognition, when she suddenly admits her love for her father (320).

However, in one respect she cannot bring herself to make concessions: she cannot submit herself wholly either to hetero-normativity or to the anti-monogamous lifestyle represented by Bobbi.

To Frances, Nick and Bobbi represent different qualities and respond to different needs, neither of which she wants to deny herself. Whereas she has always strived to impress Bobbi, her attitude to Nick is less prestigious and less competitive: “I didn’t fear Nick’s bad judgement as I feared Bobbi's" (196). In her self-examination in the second part of the novel, however, she above all observes the similarities between the two objects of her love. She enjoys seeing them getting closer and notes their resemblances. When concluding to herself that they are "physically perfect, like twins" (241), it serves as a metaphor for her attitude to relationships; close and fruitful relations are equal – like twins – regardless of their nature, and consequently they are equally valuable.

When lying in the bathtub plagued by endometriosis, she overhears Bobbi and Nick talking about her in the hallway and formulates their importance for herself: "You are my family now" (230). The hetero-love and the passionate friendship stand in no contrast to each other – they complement each other and complete Frances' life.

This insight is further developed after Frances symbolically has a kind of epiphany in a church; she suddenly conceives of life as the sum of the collective efforts of previous as well as current generations of people (293-295), or – as she later expresses it – a "complex network of objects and concepts" (320). It is in a way a manifesto she writes in her reconciliatory letter to Bobbi after her experience in the church, declaring her love and, importantly, also acknowledging that she has other desires: "now I see that nothing consists of two people, or even three. My relationship with you is also produced by your relationship with Melissa, and with Nick, and with your childhood self, etc., etc" (299).

Her way of conceiving of life and relations is certainly a celebration of a collectivistic spirit, a conception of life as a common project among human beings in all their complexities. For Frances to achieve this, paradoxically, requires her re-defining her identity and to leave her self-imposed position as inferior to Bobbi. Although her involvement with Nick has already laid a distance between the two friends, the principal step Frances takes is to write and publish a text in a literary journal.

If the revelation of the affair with Nick is the first watershed in Frances and Bobbi's relationship, the second watershed is when Bobbi finds out about Frances' literary essay. This time Bobbi reacts vehemently, but, again, the major betrayal is that Frances has acted on her own authority. Later Bobbi admits that she would not mind had she known beforehand: "I find it funny as long as I'm actually in on the joke" (301). The fact that Bobbi is the subject matter of Frances' first literary work, confirms her importance and her position as Frances' most essential relation.

It is the debacle with the essay that – after driving them apart - eventually makes them come together. Developing as an author, an artist in her own right, the roles are reversed; no matter how skilfully Bobbi debates and socializes – Frances now has a voice that speaks louder in a wider context. Thereby she elevates her status, becoming – in her own eyes – Bobbi's equal. In her letter of reconciliation, Frances also dares to make claims and formulate her standpoints – that she has other desires.

In the end, the tightly knit association between Frances and Bobbi gives way for a more allowing, still fluid and elusive, relation. The will to merge, as described by Abel and embodied by Frances' self-deprecation in poetry, is replaced by the independent and generous friendship Judith Taylor (2016) spots in contemporary female fiction. Although the emotional intensity, with erotic undertones, still prospers between Frances and Bobbi, it is with a new self-reliance and self-respect that the two best friends can re-unite. And it is with a new voice, that Frances can allow herself to experiment with relationships.

When coincidence brings Nick back into her life – significantly by a phone call, not in yet another digital text message – she is able to address the complications a resumed relation will entail, and also capable of expressing her needs: "There's the thing with Bobbi, which is important to me" (320).

If the novel literally starts by Frances defining herself as a part of the unity with Bobbi – "Bobbi and I" – it ends with the conversation with Nick, where she opens up her life to more than one relation, and to more than one way of constructing relationships. In the very last line – "Come and get me, I said" (321) – Frances expresses herself with a determination and frankness previously unseen. No longer does she hide between clever jokes or ironies, and she positions herself as an independent person, using both of the first-person pronouns in one short sentence (*me* and *I*).

Despite the ambiguous end, and despite the challenges that Frances and Bobbi's relation faces during the course of the novel, the hetero-sexual love does not disrupt or replace the female bonding. In fact, the female friendship in *Conversations with Friends* turns out to be resilient enough to endure individual development, emotional as well as artistic.

CONCLUSION

A possible reading, preferred by many reviewers, is that *Conversations with Friends* is a Bildungsroman, or coming of age-novel. Such a reading may entail an interpretation in which Frances' comes of age through a heterosexual awakening. This maturing process requires that she liberates herself from Bobbi and acknowledges an innate heterosexuality. In such a reading, Frances' artistic development mirrors her emotional one; from the collectivism of the poetry project, she takes a creative leap into solo literary writing symbolizing her individualistic self-fulfilment and the finding of her true self. The intimate female friendship, with its dissolution of identities as well as close collaboration, would thus be diminished to act as a prelude to maturity as lover and as author.

Certainly, Frances develops both emotionally and artistically during the course of the novel. This process, to start with, indeed implies the recognition of heterosexual desires, which in its turn entails that Frances gets in contact with her emotions, including those for her primary family. Secondly, she undeniably liberates herself from Bobbi, or, rather, from her self-imposed inferiority to Bobbi. And, thirdly, she outgrows the experimental avantgarde scene of spoken word by publishing her first literary work in a prestigious journal. Perhaps it is the heterosexual affair – at first nothing more than a modest fling with a married man – that sets things in motion. Regardless of what comes first, the love affair, the renegotiation of friendship, and the creative development are all part of an intricate interplay that for Frances' part results in a revised apprehension of life and human relations.

However, it is a mistake, this essay argues, to regard the female friendship and the joint poetry project as mere youthful sins or precursors to Frances' future "true" identity. Although it becomes necessary for Frances to loosen up the tight-knit bond and decrease her dependence on Bobbi, the importance of their fellowship is not devalued – despite other passions starting to grow. Having had her epiphany in the church, the first action Frances takes is to declare her love to Bobbi, establishing that it certainly is not only Platonic – it is also of sexual/romantic nature – but does not require exclusiveness. In acknowledging all feelings for Bobbi – regardless of their nature – she accepts the fluidity and elusiveness of their friendship. Further, their reconciliation is a prerequisite for her resuming contact with Nick in the end of the novel. At that point, she has gained enough self-insight to be able to declare her standpoint: their relation will have to live side by side with her relation to Bobbi.

Significantly, then, heterosexual love does not offer salvation for Frances. The novel does not conceive of normative twoness as the "true" identity that fits each and every one, nor as the overarching objective that all human strivings unavoidably must result in. To Frances, it is rather an addition, albeit an important one – while the female friendship relation constitutes the foundation.

When it comes to her creative writing, Frances indeed develops – from being part of a duo to writing in her own authority. Changing genres and starting to write prose is, however, not a denunciation of her previous creative efforts; her independent writing evolves from – not necessarily distancing itself from – the partnership with Bobbi. Instead, it yet again confirms the significance of their relation since the subject matter of her first prose text is her love for Bobbi. Noteworthy is that Bobbi, prior to this, perceptively has refrained from insisting on performing together, and foresees Frances' ambitions to be an author (227-228). Accordingly, there is no contradiction between artistic self-fulfilment and loyalty in friendship. Instead, the individual authorship symbolizes Frances' personal growth as well as the political implications of her taking action; through written language she, as a representative of the subordinated gender and social class, raises her voice and establishes a position. In other words, she puts "herself into the text – as into the world and history" (Cixous, 875).

The female friendship between Frances and Bobbi is, as this essay shows, not destroyed by the challenges posed by the affair with Nick and by Frances' literary writing; however, it is fundamentally changed. The self-deprecating and admiring passion with its craving for the merging of identities, described by Elizabeth Abel, is transformed over the course of the novel into a more allowing friendship, in line with Judith Taylor's findings. Identification and intimacy are thus replaced by independence; the self-effacing passion felt for a best friend gives way for a relation between two equally strong individuals.

In contrast to what Taylor outlines, however, the erotic passion remains between Frances and Bobbi. In this matter, *Conversations with Friends* embraces Rich and Raymond's comprehension of friendship as not essentially different from love; sexual feelings are not reserved exclusively for the hetero-relation. Also, in its refusal to be defined, categorized and labelled, the female bonds indeed challenge the patriarchal society – in line with how non-normative relations are conceived by Rich, Raymond and Foucault.

In contrast to what Lopez & Salas conclude about the relations between females and males in earlier women's literature, Rooney instead conjures an image of femininity as innovative, creative and open to changes; although not impervious to male interruption, the female bonds are certainly resilient enough to endure challenges. Masculinity, in comparison, is in general depicted as devoid of imagination and vitality. Not even the most salient male character, Nick, has the power to disrupt the female affinity. However, his presence triggers a redefinition of Frances and Bobbi's relation as well as Frances' emotional development.

This examination of *Conversations with Friends* has focused exclusively on the theme of female friendship. Other themes may also deserve further investigation, for example the female body, including medical conditions (endometriosis, self-harm), pain, motherhood and/or the possibility of motherhood. Another topic that may be of interest for further examination is how digital communication is depicted and how it affects the literary composition.

In its interpretation of friendship, this essay has attempted to highlight a significant theme in many contemporary works of literature, as well as in films and tv-series. While Janice Raymond suggested as early as in the 80's that the time was ripe for a theory of female friendship, one can only conclude that, more than three decades later, there is still a lack of research in this field. Not least given the number of successful female authorships and the advances in gender theory during the time that has passed, Raymond's words from 1986 deserve to be reiterated: "Feminist thought is at a point in its history where it needs a theory of female friendship" (Raymond, 37).

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