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Friendship, Hope and Communication During Second-Wave and Postfeminism: Gillian E. Hanscombe's *Between Friends* and Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*

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Abstract
This paper examines the intersections of friendship, hope, and communication within two distinct feminist contexts: Gillian E. Hanscombe's *Between Friends* (1982) [1] and Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) [2]. While Hanscombe's epistolary narrative reflects the fervent debates of Anglo-American second-wave feminism—particularly around separatism, sexuality, and utopian politics—Rooney's novel highlights the fragmented, ironic, and often sceptical modes of interaction characteristic of postfeminist subjectivity shaped by neoliberal capitalism. By contrasting Hanscombe's optimistic belief in communal transformation with Rooney's portrayal of alienated intimacy, the paper situates both texts within their respective historical and political climates. The analysis suggests that although the modes of communication differ—letters versus digital exchanges—both novels reveal the enduring significance of hope, solidarity, and friendship as essential dimensions of feminist identity. Ultimately, this study underscores how shifting feminist sensibilities reshape not only literary representation but also the possibilities of human connection in times of ideological transition.

Keywords: Second-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism, Gillian E. Hanscombe, Sally Rooney, Friendship, Hope, Communication, Neoliberalism

Introduction

Friendship, as both a personal and political concept, has long been central to feminist thought, shaping debates about solidarity, community, and the private dimensions of resistance. In Gillian E. Hanscombe's *Between Friends* (1982) [1], the epistolary form becomes a stage for second-wave feminist concerns, particularly those surrounding separatism, sexuality, and the pursuit of radical social change. Nearly four decades later, Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) [2] revisits friendship from a very different vantage point: one marked by postfeminist ambivalence, neoliberal pressures, and the fragmentation of communication in the digital age. To juxtapose these two works is to trace the evolution of feminist sensibilities across historical contexts—from the optimism and utopian hopes of radical feminist activism to the skepticism, irony, and sense of impasse characterizing a generation negotiating intimacy and identity within late capitalism.

Hanscombe's novel unfolds through the correspondence of four women—Meg, Frances, Jane, and Amy—whose letters constitute both personal confidences and ideological arguments. Their conversations address the pressing debates of Anglo-American second-wave feminism, ranging from motherhood and reproductive rights to political lesbianism and separatist ideals. The form of the novel itself highlights a distinctly feminist practice of communication: the letter as a space of dialogue, solidarity, and intellectual experimentation. Writing, for these women, is not a detached act but a political intervention; to theorize is already to practice revolution. The epistolary form, associated historically with female intimacy and authenticity, becomes in Hanscombe's hands a collective archive of feminist struggle.

The content of these letters reflects the radical ambitions and contradictions of the second-wave movement. Jane embodies the separatist impulse, advocating for the establishment of all-women communities and rejecting heterosexual relationships altogether. Amy, by contrast, leans toward reformist ideals, convinced of feminism's ability to reshape social and political institutions rather than abandon them outright. Meg functions as a mediating voice, sympathetic to radical positions yet unwilling to sever her maternal bond with her son, a figure who complicates the separatist ideal of rejecting men entirely.

Frances, the most skeptical of the group, embodies the liberal feminist desire for emancipation within the existing system, convinced that the gains of the movement—such as reproductive rights, legal equality, and workplace reforms—had already secured women's liberation by the early 1980s.

These divergent positions dramatize the internal divisions within second-wave feminism itself. Scholars like Judith Evans emphasize that the central tension of the period was between liberal feminism's faith in reform and radical feminism's insistence on structural transformation. Hanscombe's characters embody these theoretical positions in their daily lives, turning abstract debates into lived experience. For instance, Meg's experimentation with reproductive technologies, such as in-vitro fertilization, becomes a feminist practice in itself, as she uses her expertise to help other women, especially lesbians, conceive without reliance on men. Amy and Tim, her heterosexual counterparts, experiment with non-penetrative sex as a rejection of patriarchal sexual norms, while Jane embraces separatism as a means of constructing a new social reality altogether. These practices may seem extreme or impractical to later generations, but within the fictional world of *Between Friends*, they are infused with hope, energy, and an unwavering faith in revolution.

Yet Hanscombe does not portray this world as harmonious. Frances's refusal to accept the link between the personal and political exposes a fracture in the feminist ideal of solidarity. Her insistence on maintaining a purely "personal" friendship with Meg—even after Meg is raped by Frances's partner—illustrates the dangers of liberal feminism's insistence on individual autonomy at the expense of collective responsibility. Frances's silence and complicity reveal how political choices are embedded in personal decisions, even when denied. For readers, her position exposes the limitations of a feminism that celebrates independence while ignoring structures of power that still perpetuate inequality.

The novel's insistence on dialogue and disagreement demonstrates how second-wave feminism thrived on debate, even when it risked fragmentation. The act of writing letters itself reflects a commitment to sustained communication—each letter an attempt to persuade, to console, or to challenge. This contrasts sharply with the communication structures in Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*, where characters rely on fragmented text messages and emails that mirror the discontinuity of their relationships. While Hanscombe's characters labor over long, thoughtful letters, Rooney's Frances sends curt replies or ironic remarks, maintaining emotional distance rather than pursuing understanding.

This divergence between epistolary continuity and digital fragmentation mirrors the larger shift from second-wave to postfeminist sensibilities. Hanscombe's novel emerged from a historical moment of activism and optimism. Despite internal conflicts and naïve utopian proposals—such as abolishing men entirely or creating separatist enclaves—her characters believe passionately in the possibility of collective transformation. Their letters overflow with conviction that feminism could remake the world. By contrast, Rooney's characters inhabit a world where grand narratives have collapsed. In the postfeminist climate shaped by neoliberalism, the individual is tasked with responsibility for her own success, happiness, and resilience. The result is an ironic detachment, a tendency to critique rather than to endorse, and a reluctance to imagine systemic change.

Rooney's Frances is emblematic of this sensibility. A young, educated poet living in Dublin, she is intellectually aware of class and gender inequalities yet paralyzed by her own economic precarity and health struggles. Unlike Hanscombe's Frances, who rejects feminism altogether, Rooney's Frances never labels herself a feminist, though she participates in feminist university groups and espouses feminist ideas. This reluctance reflects what Rosalind Gill has described as the postfeminist sensibility: a contradictory formation in which feminist values are assumed but rarely declared, overshadowed by neoliberal emphases on individuality, self-surveillance, and personal responsibility. Frances embodies this condition. She is highly self-reflective, constantly analyzing her own texts and communications, but she withholds her emotions from friends, avoiding vulnerability. Her communication style—ironic, brief, inconsistent—mirrors the neoliberal subject's need to manage self-image while avoiding genuine exposure.

The economic dimension of Rooney's novel underscores the limitations of postfeminist individualism. Frances's decision to publish a short story about her friend Bobbi, despite the risk of damaging their relationship, is motivated not by artistic ambition but by hunger. Her financial insecurity transforms personal relationships into economic transactions, undermining the possibility of trust and solidarity. In this sense, the novel highlights how neoliberal precarity erodes the foundations of community. Frances's isolation during her endometriosis crisis further illustrates how structural inequalities manifest as personal suffering. Cut off from support, she internalizes blame and concludes she is undeserving of care. This self-abjection exemplifies what José Carregal-Romero identifies as neoliberal subjectivity: the alienated self that blames its own failures rather than recognizing systemic causes.

Despite these differences, both Hanscombe and Rooney portray friendship as a site of both tension and possibility. In *Between Friends*, solidarity is tested but ultimately affirmed when characters move in together, envisioning a collective life that includes men willing to transform themselves. Even Jane, the staunch separatist, eventually concedes to community, suggesting that feminist commitment requires evolution rather than rigid adherence to principles. In Rooney's novel, friendships are more fragile and uncertain, but they remain vital sources of connection in a world otherwise dominated by irony and detachment. Frances and Bobbi's bond, though strained by betrayal and miscommunication, suggests the persistence of intimacy despite neoliberal constraints.

The contrast between these novels underscores how feminist literature responds to its sociohistorical context. Hanscombe's narrative reflects the optimism of the 1970s and early 1980s, when activism promised structural change, while Rooney's reflects the disillusionment of a generation facing precarious labor, declining faith in politics, and the commodification of relationships. Yet both insist on the significance of friendship as a mode of resistance, however fragile or compromised.

The juxtaposition of Hanscombe and Rooney also reveals how forms of communication shape political imagination. In *Between Friends*, the letter is not simply a narrative device but a symbolic space of feminist praxis. To write to one another is to acknowledge interdependence, to labor for dialogue even in the face of disagreement. The very length

and detail of the letters underscore a belief that arguments, emotions, and solidarities deserve sustained attention. When Meg writes at length about her experiences or Jane outlines the rationale for separatism, the letter becomes a forum where theory and practice converge. This mode of communication reflects second-wave feminism's insistence on consciousness-raising, a practice rooted in dialogue and the conviction that sharing personal experiences is inherently political.

By contrast, the communication in Rooney's novel is marked by brevity, inconsistency, and irony. Frances's text messages to Nick or Bobbi are often delayed, fragmented, or reduced to witty one-liners that shield vulnerability rather than foster connection. Even emails, which offer more space than texts, rarely develop into extended conversations. Instead, they serve as fragments of intimacy—sometimes flirtatious, sometimes confessional—but always marked by discontinuity. This stylistic choice mirrors the neoliberal subject's alienation: communication is constant yet shallow, omnipresent yet unsatisfying. Rooney's narrative suggests that under neoliberalism, even language itself becomes commodified, stripped of the capacity to sustain meaningful connection.

This difference in form illuminates the contrasting politics of the two feminist moments. For Hanscombe's characters, the utopian vision of separatism or collective life is made possible precisely because they are willing to invest time, energy, and care into communication. Their letters represent a form of hope—an insistence that dialogue can lead to understanding, that theory and practice can transform society. Even when their ideas seem extreme, such as rejecting all men or imagining separatist enclaves, the fervor with which they write signals belief in the possibility of change. By contrast, Rooney's characters demonstrate what Slavoj Žižek calls "cynical distance": they know the structures of oppression, they critique them with sharpness, yet they continue to participate in them, convinced of the futility of alternatives. Frances's ironic detachment exemplifies this paradox—her refusal to embrace grand narratives of revolution does not liberate her but traps her in passivity.

Yet Rooney does not depict her characters as wholly hopeless. The novel suggests that while grand systemic transformation feels unimaginable, change remains possible at the interpersonal level. Frances's gradual evolution—from self-isolation and abjection to tentative openness with Bobbi and Nick—demonstrates that intimacy, however fragile, can still resist neoliberal fragmentation. When Frances finally expresses vulnerability and allows herself to depend on others, she gestures toward a reimagined form of solidarity. This is not the sweeping revolution of Hanscombe's radicals but a quieter, more precarious hope rooted in personal connection.

The tension between personal and political emerges as a central concern in both novels. Hanscombe dramatizes the feminist slogan "the personal is political" by showing how private choices—about motherhood, sexuality, or friendship—carry ideological significance. Frances's refusal to support Meg after her rape demonstrates the impossibility of separating personal loyalty from political commitment. Jane's insistence on separatism likewise highlights how intimate desires shape political ideologies. In Rooney's novel, this entanglement of personal and political persists, but with a twist: neoliberalism reframes political struggles as personal failures. Frances interprets her financial insecurity, her illness, and her strained relationships as evidence of her own inadequacy rather than as consequences of structural inequalities. This internalization of blame reflects the postfeminist emphasis on individual responsibility, obscuring the systemic roots of suffering.

Despite these differences, both texts insist that friendship remains a vital site of feminist politics. In Hanscombe, friendship is explicitly theorized as a form of community-building, a practice of solidarity that challenges patriarchal structures. The decision of the characters to live together at the novel's conclusion represents a utopian commitment to collective life, one that insists on the possibility of transformation through shared struggle. In Rooney, friendship is more fraught, marked by betrayal, silence, and irony, yet it still offers moments of connection that resist neoliberal isolation. Frances's bond with Bobbi, though strained, remains central to her survival and growth. Even in a world that discourages solidarity, the novel suggests, friendship retains the capacity to nurture hope.

Thematically, both Hanscombe and Rooney foreground hope as a crucial resource, though they depict it differently. Hanscombe's hope is utopian, oriented toward revolution and systemic change. Her characters believe that feminism can abolish oppressive structures, even if their solutions are sometimes reductive or exclusionary. Rooney's hope is more modest, focused on interpersonal healing and survival. Frances does not imagine overthrowing capitalism or patriarchy, but she learns to find meaning in connection, vulnerability, and artistic expression. This shift reflects the broader historical trajectory of feminism itself: from the revolutionary aspirations of the second wave to the ambivalent pragmatism of postfeminist sensibility.

One might argue that Rooney's novel critiques the very conditions that produce such modest hopes. By portraying Frances as financially precarious, physically ill, and emotionally isolated, Rooney highlights how neoliberalism undermines the possibility of collective struggle. The novel's fragmented communication style becomes a formal representation of this condition: intimacy itself is precarious, constantly threatened by economic and social pressures. Yet the persistence of friendship, however tenuous, signals that hope endures even under these constraints. In this sense, Rooney's novel complements rather than negates Hanscombe's: both insist that friendship remains indispensable, even if its forms and meanings shift across historical contexts.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the comparison between Hanscombe and Rooney illustrates the evolution of feminist literary forms. Hanscombe's epistolary structure aligns with second-wave feminism's emphasis on dialogue, consciousness-raising, and collective action. Rooney's fragmented digital communication aligns with postfeminist sensibilities shaped by neoliberal individualism and irony. Both forms, however, dramatize the relationship between communication and politics, reminding readers that how we speak to one another reflects—and shapes—the worlds we inhabit.

By bringing these novels into dialogue, we can see how literature both reflects and critiques the feminist contexts of its time. *Between Friends* preserves the optimism of the 1970s, even as it acknowledges internal divisions and the dangers of exclusionary politics. *Conversations with Friends* captures the contradictions of the 2010s, when feminist

ideals persist but are often muted by irony, economic precarity, and disillusionment. Together, they demonstrate that while feminist sensibilities evolve, the centrality of friendship, hope, and communication remains constant. These novels remind us that even when revolution feels out of reach, the bonds we form with others continue to shape our capacity to imagine and pursue a better world.

In due course, the comparison of Hanscombe and Rooney underscores the enduring significance of feminist literature as a site of cultural critique. By tracing the shifting meanings of friendship and communication, these texts reveal how historical contexts shape not only political ideologies but also the forms of intimacy and solidarity available to individuals. Hanscombe's characters, writing long letters filled with utopian dreams, remind us of the power of collective imagination. Rooney's characters, exchanging fragmented messages marked by irony and vulnerability, remind us of the challenges of connection in a neoliberal age. Both, however, affirm that hope and friendship remain essential to the feminist project, however differently conceived.

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