

Plot context

Several months after the scholarship, Connell is suffering from deep depression and visits a university counselling service. He fills out a questionnaire that forces him to confront his despair and suicidal thoughts. Alienated and numb, he feels detached from others and from his own life, moving through routine without meaning or connection.

Thematic summary

This extract explores loneliness, mental illness, and the quiet crisis of masculinity. Rooney's close third-person narration immerses readers in Connell's depressive mindset, where alienation and shame distort everyday experiences. The institutional coldness of the setting mirrors his internal void, highlighting how structures meant to support can instead amplify a sense of isolation.

Three Months Later (MARCH 2014)

In the waiting room he has to fill out a questionnaire. The seats are brightly coloured, arranged around a coffee table with a children's abacus toy on it. The coffee table is much too low for him to lean forward and fill out the pages on its surface, so he arranges them awkwardly in his lap instead. On the receptionist's first question he pierces the page with his ballpoint pen and leaves a tiny tear in the paper. He looks up at the receptionist who provided him with the form but she's not watching, so he looks back down again. The second question is headed 'Pessimism'. He has to circle the number beside one of the following statements:

- 0 I am not discouraged about future my
- 1 I feel more discouraged about my future than I used to be
- 2 I do not expect things to work out for me
- 3 I feel my future is hopeless and will only get worse

It seems to him that any of these statements could plausibly be true, or more than one of them could be true at the same time. He puts the end of his pen between his teeth. Reading the fourth sentence, which for some reason is labelled '3', gives Connell a prickling feeling inside the soft tissue of his nose, like the sentence is calling out to him. It's true, he feels his future is hopeless and will only get worse. The more he thinks about it, the more it resonates. He doesn't even have to think about it, because he feels it: its syntax seems to have originated inside him. He rubs his tongue hard on the roof of his mouth, trying to settle his face into a neutral frown of concentration. Not wanting to alarm the woman who will receive the questionnaire, he circles statement 2 instead.

It was Niall who told him about the service. What he said specifically was: It's free, so you might as well. Niall is a practical person, and he shows compassion in practical ways. Connell hasn't been

seeing much of him lately, because Connell lives in his scholarship accommodation now and doesn't see much of anyone anymore. Last night he spent an hour and a half lying on the floor of his room, because he was too tired to complete the journey from his en suite back to his bed. There was the en suite, behind him, and there was the bed, in front of him, both well within view, but somehow it was impossible to move either forward or backwards, only downwards, onto the floor, until his body was arranged motionless on the carpet. Well, here I am on the floor, he thought. Is life so much worse here than it would be on the bed, or even in a totally different location? No, life is exactly the same. Life is the thing you bring with you inside your own head. I might as well be lying here, breathing the vile dust of the carpet into my lungs, gradually feeling my right arm go numb under the weight of my body, because it's essentially the same as every other possible experience.

o I feel the same about myself as ever

1 I have lost confidence in myself

2 I am disappointed in myself

3 I dislike myself

He looks up at the woman behind the glass. It strikes him now for the first time that they've placed a glass screen between this woman and the people in the waiting room. Do they imagine that people like Connell pose a risk to the woman behind the glass? Do they imagine that the students who come in here and patiently fill out the questionnaires, who repeat their own names again and again for the woman to type into her computer do they imagine that these people want to hurt the woman behind the desk? Do they think that because Connell sometimes lies on his own floor for hours, he might one day purchase a semi-automatic machine gun online and commit mass murder in a shopping centre? Nothing could be further from his mind than committing mass murder. He feels guilty after he stammers a word on the phone. Still, he can see the logic: mentally unhealthy people are contaminated in some way and possibly dangerous. If they don't attack the woman behind the desk due to uncontrollable violent impulses, they might breathe some kind of microbe in her direction, causing her to dwell unhealthily on all the failed relationships in her past. He circles 3 and moves on.

o I don't have any thoughts of killing myself

1 I have thoughts of killing myself, but I would not carry them out

2 I would like to kill myself

3 I would kill myself if I had the chance

He glances back over at the woman again. He doesn't want to confess to her, a total stranger, that he would like to kill himself. Last night on the floor he fantasised about lying completely still until he died of dehydration, however long that took. Days maybe, but relaxing days in which he wouldn't

have to do anything or focus very hard. Who would find his body? He didn't care. The fantasy, purified by weeks of repetition, ends at the moment of death: the calm, silent eyelid that closes over everything for good. He circles statement 1.

After completing the rest of the questions, all of which are intensely personal and the last one is about his sex life, he folds the pages over and hands them back to the receptionist. He doesn't know what to expect, handing over this extremely sensitive information to a stranger. He swallows and his throat is so tight it hurts. The woman takes the sheets like he's handing over a delayed college assignment and gives him a bland, cheerful smile. Thanks, she says. You can wait for the counsellor to call you now. He stands there limply. In her hand she holds the most deeply private information he has ever shared with anyone. Seeing her nonchalance, he experiences an impulse to ask for it back, as if he must have misunderstood the nature of this exchange, and maybe he should fill it out differently after all. Instead he says: Okay. He sits down again.

For a while nothing happens. His stomach is making a low whining noise now because he hasn't eaten breakfast. Lately he's too tired to cook for himself in the evenings, so he finds himself signing in for dinner on the scholars' website and eating Commons in the Dining Hall. Before the meal everyone stands for grace, which is recited in Latin. Then the food is served by other students, who are dressed all in black to differentiate them from the otherwise identical students who are being served. The meals are always the same: salty orange soup to start, with a bread roll and a square of butter wrapped in foil. Then a piece of meat in gravy, with silver dishes of potatoes passed around. Then dessert, some kind of wet sugary cake, or the fruit salad which is mostly grapes. These are all served rapidly and whisked away rapidly, while portraits of men from different centuries glare down from the walls in expensive regalia. Eating alone like this, over hearing the conversations of others but unable to join in, Connell feels profoundly and almost unendurably alienated from his own body. After the meal another grace is recited, with the ugly noise of chairs pulled back from tables. By seven he has emerged into the darkness of Front Square, and the lamps have been lit.

A middle aged woman comes out to the waiting room now, wearing a long grey cardigan, and says: Connell? He tries to contort his face into a smile, and then, giving up, rubs his jaw with his hand instead, nodding. My name is Gillian, she says. Would you like to come with me? He rises from the couch and follows her into a small office. She closes the door behind them. On one side of the office is a desk with an ancient Microsoft computer humming audibly; on the other side, two low mint coloured armchairs facing one another. Now then, Connell, she says. You can sit down wherever you like. He sits on the chair facing the window, out of which he can see the back of a concrete building and a rusting drain pipe. She sits down opposite him and picks up a pair of glasses from a chain around her neck. She fixes them on her face and looks down at her clipboard.

Reflection

- **Thematic:** How does Rooney depict the experience of depression and alienation through Connell's inner thoughts and surroundings?
- **Stylistic:** In what ways does Rooney's detailed realism and flat tone evoke the numbness of Connell's mental state?
- **Conceptual:** What does this scene suggest about vulnerability and the barriers to seeking help in contemporary society?

How does the author use the physical setting of the waiting room and the counseling session to reflect Connell's emotional state?

- Analyze the significance of the bright colors, the abacus toy, the low coffee table, and the glass screen. How do these elements contrast with Connell's feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and discomfort?

What do the questionnaires Connell fills out reveal about his internal conflict, and how does the author use his reactions to these questions to deepen the portrayal of his mental health struggles?

- Consider how Connell's response to the "Pessimism" and "Suicidal Thoughts" questions reveals his sense of hopelessness. Why does he choose to circle certain answers even though he feels differently?

How does the author use the motif of social interactions to explore Connell's sense of alienation?

- Discuss Connell's detachment during the formal dinners and his inability to connect with others. How does this contribute to the theme of alienation from his body, surroundings, and society?

What role does guilt and shame play in Connell's behavior, and how does the author stylistically convey this in the text?

- Analyze Connell's reluctance to admit his suicidal thoughts or express vulnerability in front of the receptionist. How does the author's use of internal monologue and Connell's body language reflect his shame and discomfort?

In what ways does the author use repetition, such as the recurring thoughts about Connell lying on the floor or his fantasies about dying, to explore his deteriorating mental state?

- Examine how these recurring images and thoughts highlight Connell's growing sense of numbness and despair. How does the repetition contribute to the development of the theme of mental health?