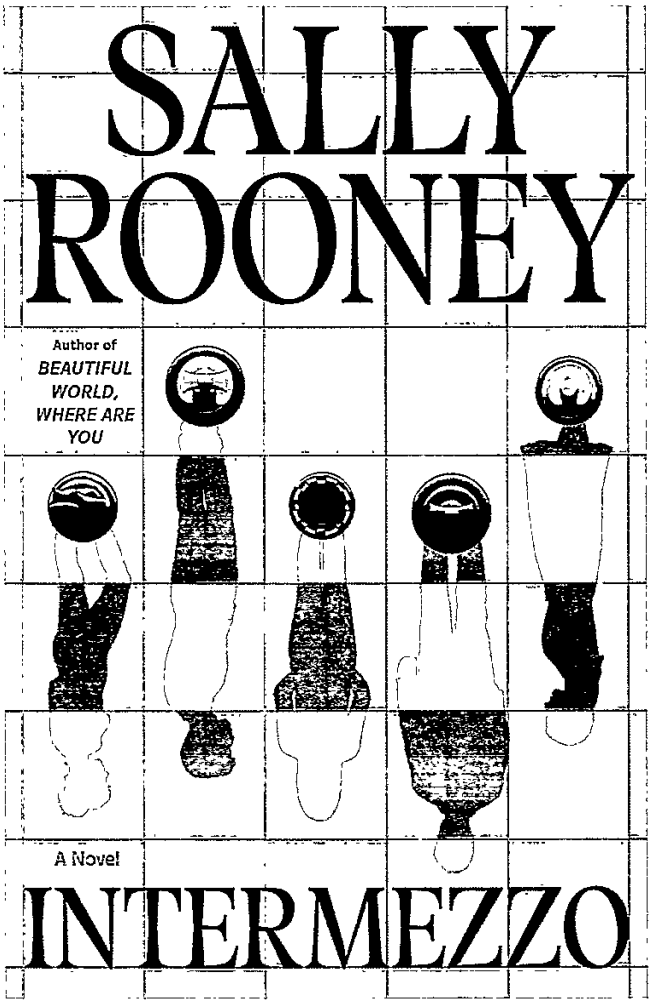
Candidate 1 evidence

The literary techniques used by Sally Rooney to explore the theme of the impact of trauma on relationships



Word count: 3137

'Intermezzo' by Sally Rooney is an exploration of the complexity of human relationships through the lens of trauma, centring on brothers Peter and Ivan's grief following the death of their father. The novel's title, 'Intermezzo', is defined in chess as an in-between move where a player makes an unexpected, forcing move instead of an anticipated response, serving as an extended metaphor throughout the text for the way death can disrupt and reshape the lives and relationships of those affected without warning. Through the differing experiences of Peter and Ivan in the aftermath of their father's death, Rooney illustrates how trauma can profoundly alter both romantic relationships as "the guilt of grief comes against the feeling of falling in love"[1] and also the brothers' own dynamic, drawing some people closer together whilst inevitably distancing others. Rooney achieves this by deploying a range of literary techniques, including symbolism, free indirect narration, inner monologues, and literary allusions, each deepening the reader's understanding of the characters' internal conflict. By the novel's conclusion, Rooney proposes that while trauma may irrevocably impact relationships, it does not necessarily destroy them, allowing for hope of renewal and a path forward.

Peter, the older brother, is a human rights lawyer based in Dublin who is outwardly accomplished yet emotionally fractured. Beneath his polished exterior, he struggles to navigate two strained relationships: with Sylvia, his ex-girlfriend, who represents an idealised past when his father was still alive, and with Naomi, a younger partner who is **"legally homeless, and borderline what you might call a sex worker"**[2] who relies on him for both emotional and financial stability as she reflects Peter's present reality, one marked by loss and emotional emptiness following his father's death. In his attempts to cope with grief, guilt and emotional exhaustion, Peter's unresolved trauma affects both relationships, drawing him closer to Sylvia while initially isolating Naomi.

The death of Peter's father exacerbates the tension between him and Naomi, laying bare the emotional distance that has developed between them. From the opening scene, Peter seeks Naomi for physical comfort, immediately establishing the transactional nature of their relationship. His sensory, physical descriptions of her (**"Naomi's mouth answers...her**

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[1]O'Neill, C. (2024) *Mixing loss with life in "Intermezzo".* Chicago Review of Books. Available at: https://chireviewofbooks.com/2024/10/01/intermezzo/ Accessed 14/03/26

[2] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo.* London: Faber & Faber, p. 74

breath warm, the scent of coffee"[3] and **"on the countertop in a leather miniskirt, laddered tights, legs swinging. Her supreme desirability."**[4]) signal how he perceives her primarily as sexual escape rather than genuine emotional connection. Peter's detachment becomes starkly apparent when they meet for the first time since his father's death and Naomi asks **"Where have you been?...Off on a late summer holiday, were you?"**[5], prompting Peter to finally tell her the truth. The dialogue escalates when Naomi remarks **"I guess you didn't want me to be there,"**[6] revealing her vulnerability and sense of exclusion. This scene crystallises the emotional asymmetry of their relationship: Peter's grief manifests as withdrawal, leaving Naomi exposed and marginalised. His exclusion of Naomi from the funeral also serves as a symbol that encapsulates the broader distance present in their relationship during this period, while Sylvia's presence at the service positions her as both literally and metaphorically present for Peter in his deepest moment of grief. His later confession to Sylvia in reference to his relationship with Naomi: **"I think that might be on its way out"**[7] reveals how trauma pulls him toward one woman while pushing the other away.

Peter and Naomi's relationship unfolds like a game between the two, with each of them attempting to gain control as Peter's inability to process his father's death has distorted intimacy into a toxic power struggle. Peter observes **"She doesn't care about you, it's just a game"**[8] and later admits **"Someone just seems like they have to be exploiting someone here. But who, and how? He her, financially, sexually. Or she him, financially, emotionally."**[9] He questions: **"Why does everything have to be so complicated? He knows why. Flashing eyes of two animals through the undergrowth. Yes: what they**

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[3] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 5

[4] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 69

[5] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 4

[6] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 7

[7] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 129

[8] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 74

[9] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 65

want from each other"[10], with this animalistic metaphor reducing their dynamic to one of predator and prey, stripping away any pretence of emotional connection. Fiore dismisses their relationship as one of "fantasy and no substance"[11] yet Rooney does this deliberately, using the animalistic metaphor, the game imagery and fragmented syntax to suggest that the emptiness is itself the point: Peter's trauma has hollowed out his capacity for genuine connection with Naomi. The theme of manipulation and games recurs as a trope throughout the novel, culminating at the end of their relationship where Peter describes his farewell to Naomi as the **"Final gruesome victory in a game he never should have played."**[12], one that had begun to feel **"like a stage fight where it turns out the knives are real"**[13].

Conversely, Sylvia symbolises an idealised version of Peter's past, one in which emotional stability and familial security still seemed intact. The repeated flashbacks to this period highlight his longing for the simpler times prior to his father's death as noted by O'Neill: "As he mourns his father, he also grieves for the life he and Sylvia could have had together, unable to give up their lost future"[14]. Ivan recalls that after Peter met Sylvia he **"had never seen his brother looking so relaxed and happy. After that Peter came home more often, always with Sylvia, and the house would be noisy with conversation and laughter and footsteps racing up and down the stairs"**[15]**.** Amidst his grief, Peter is drawn to Sylvia whom he was **"practically married"**[16] to before, in an attempt to gain comfort from the reminder of his past life. Rooney deepens this dichotomy between Sylvia and Naomi through literary allusions to other works. After receiving a message from Sylvia, Peter walks through an area of Dublin steeped in personal memory, where Rooney embeds a reference to T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste

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[10] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 65

[11] Fiore, A. (2024) *Sally Rooney's Intermezzo disappoints by going nowhere.* Kenyon Collegian. Available at: *https://kenyoncollegian.com/arts/2024/10/sally-rooneys-intermezzo-disappoints-by-going-nowhere/* Accessed 23/03/26

[12] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 349

[13] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 400

[14] O'Neill, C. (2024) *Mixing loss with life in "Intermezzo"*. Chicago Review of Books. Available at: https://chireviewofbooks.com/2024/10/01/intermezzo/ Accessed 14/03/26

[15] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 344

[16] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 346

Land' as Peter thinks **"Mixing memory and desire"**[17], a phrase which perfectly encapsulates Peter's perception of both women as Sylvia embodies memory and Naomi desire. His subsequent reflection, **"Graveyard of youth"**[18], serves as a paradox which juxtaposes the vitality of youth with the finality of death, capturing both his longing for a simpler past and his despair that it is irretrievably gone. Through this, Rooney develops the theme of memories which recurs throughout the novel, where Peter is shown to be trapped within his recollections, with these memories becoming both a source of comfort but also a force of stagnation, preventing him from fully living in his present reality.

The support Sylvia provides while Peter is navigating this loss further fosters their bond. Rooney sharpens the contrast between the women: Naomi remains the subject of Peter's sexual desires, whilst Sylvia is unable to engage in sexual intimacy following a traumatic car accident which has left her in chronic pain, leaving her feeling that her life before that is **"visible behind a thin veil, through which even a hand could pass, touching, but not."**[19], exposing the inherent limitation in Peter and Sylvia's relationship and reinforcing the sense that neither connection is wholly complete. Peter's description of Sylvia as a **"sensible woman"**[20] provides the first insight into his inner dialogue about her, contrasting with the physical descriptions of Naomi. Their dinner together serves as a subtle symbolic gesture, positioning Sylvia as a healthy and nurturing presence in Peter's life as he **"hadn't realised how hungry he was until then"**: a deliberate contrast to Naomi, whose role remains confined to fleeting physical escape rather than lasting emotional fulfilment. Rooney's deployment of free indirect narration further illuminates Sylvia's calming effect on Peter, as revealed by his inner thoughts: **Realises at last how tired he is. Effect of her presence: stills the nerves"**[21]**.** The depth of this connection is illustrated when Peter has an emotional release while in Sylvia's presence, where his fragmented inner monologue: **"Why these regretful feelings, and for whom? His father, himself? Pointless. Depressed even thinking about**

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[17] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 13

[18] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 13

[19] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 282

[20] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 10

[21] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 14

it. Depressed in general. probably."[22] exposes his suppressed struggle, while Sylvia's response **"She glances. Everything communicated. Enveloped in the depth of her understanding."**[23] requires no words, positioning her as uniquely attuned to Peter's emotional turmoil in a way Naomi never is. This pattern recurs towards the end of the novel when, amidst navigating his situation with both women, Peter asks Sylvia **"But that won't bring him back?"**[24], a moment of vulnerability that reveals how their relationship has deepened through his grief and her unwavering emotional support.

Ivan, the younger brother, is a socially awkward "fading chess prodigy whose early promise remains unrealised"[25] and whose difficulty forming meaningful connections manifests in his emotional isolation. His relationship with Margaret, an older, empathetic woman, offers a refuge in which to process his grief. In contrast, his relationship with Peter deteriorates following their father's death, as the brothers' contrasting personalities, Ivan's hidden resentment, and Peter's controlling nature produce months of silence as "Grief is a bridge and a chasm; it ambushes and intoxicates them."[26] The distinction between Peter and Ivan's experiences of grief and its impact on their lives and relationships is reinforced not only thematically but through the free indirect narrative. Rooney uses this as a method of characterisation, deploying a fragmented Joycean stream of consciousness technique that "captures the state of the unconsoled"[27] in Peter's sections to reflect his fractured emotional state, before shifting to systematic, ordered prose in Ivan's chapters, mirroring the more methodical perspective of his character. Peter's sections also include syntactical delay, in

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[22] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 15

[23] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 16

[24] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 415

[25] Bari, S. (2024) *Intermezzo by Sally Rooney — an engrossing study of the male psyche*. Financial Times. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/59100255-ed50-46f5-bff9-425b0fd6e8a5 Accessed 28/03/26

[26] The Economist (2024) *Sally Rooney shows how to escape the trap of success*. Available at: https://www.economist.com/culture/2024/09/20/sally-rooney-shows-how-to-escape-the-trap-of-success Accessed 27/03/26

[27] Cao, S. (2025) *Intermezzo: A Novel by Sally Rooney*. World Literature Today. Available at: https://worldliteraturetoday.org/2025/january/intermezzo-novel-sally-rooney Accessed 26/03/26

which the subject of the sentence appears later than you might expect it, such as "**Bright and cool Naomi's eyes**"[28], reflecting "the slippage of self he's obviously suffering"[29], allowing the reader to experience grief's disorientation.

Ivan's confession to Margaret of his conflicted feelings about his father's death marks a turning point in their relationship, deepening their connection. In the aftermath of their father's funeral, both brothers seek to fill the void his absence has created. They both involve themselves in mirroring romantic entanglements as "both brothers feel isolated in their mourning, and fall into parallel age gap relationships"[30] yet with contrasting dynamics as Peter assumes a parental role toward Naomi, deepening her dependence on him, whilst Ivan finds in Margaret a sense of adult stability and emotional grounding as "It's a meeting of mutual loneliness—in the other, they each feel seen."[31]. Ivan sees himself as **"a frustrated observer of apparently impenetrable systems"**[32] yet, despite his awkwardness, he begins seeing Margaret and opening up to her about his grief, admitting that **"It is really weird, definitely. That he's gone. And I have my regrets, you know."**[33], while she listens attentively, having also lost her father. Margaret alone offers Ivan comfort in his bereavement as Ivan confesses **"I just don't have anyone to talk to about these things".**[34] The emotional void Ivan experiences following his father's death appears to be partially filled by this relationship with Margaret, as he reflects that, **"In the weeks since his father died Ivan has not heard these words from anyone, I love you, or said them to anyone either,"**[35] yet **"even to think of Margaret with love gives**

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[28] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo.* London: Faber & Faber, p. 72

[29] Vickery, H.S. (2025) 'Formal People.' *The London Magazine*. The London Magazine. Available at: https://thelondonmagazine.org/article/review-formal-people-by-hester-styles-vickery/ Accessed 24/03/26

[30] Goudsmit, K. (2025) *Inversed: A review of Intermezzo by Sally Rooney.* Available at: *https://berkeleyfictionreview.org/2025/02/24/inversed-a-review-of-intermezzo-by-sally-rooney/* Accessed 28/03/26

[31] O'Neill, C. (2024) *Mixing loss with life in "Intermezzo".* Chicago Review of Books. Available at: https://chireviewofbooks.com/2024/10/01/intermezzo/ Accessed 14/03/26

[32] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo.* London: Faber & Faber, p. 87

[33] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo.* London: Faber & Faber, p. 107

[34] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo.* London: Faber & Faber, p. 108

[35] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo.* London: Faber & Faber, p. 196

a little relief,"[36] highlighting how Margaret has become one of the few remaining sources of genuine affection in his life, increasing his emotional reliance on her.

This emotional dependence is further evident in the release of his repressed emotions through his conversations with Margaret. Particularly regarding his father, **"Ivan often talks about his father…now and then Ivan will repeat to Margaret a particular anecdote he has already told…perhaps to relieve some of the pressure of keeping all these stories inside himself all the time".**[37] He also reveals the hidden resentment he feels toward Peter for delivering the eulogy at his father's funeral, saying **"I would have done better. I was a lot closer with Dad than he was. And I understood him more. But Peter pressured me not to do it"**[38] showcasing how such conflicted feelings come to the surface in Margaret's presence, with the repeated language of 'pressure' creating a dichotomy between Margaret, who relieves Ivan's emotional burden, and Peter, who compounds it.

A dinner between the brothers marks a significant turning point in their relationship. Their interaction begins with shared vulnerability as Ivan admits in relation to his chess **"It bothers me a lot to lose"**[39] with Peter also confessing in response, **"It bothers me a lot too,"**[40] reinforcing the recurring motif of games linking Ivan's chess-playing with Peter's professional life. However, tensions escalate sharply when Ivan reveals Margaret's age, provoking Peter's instinctive intervention, framed in his mind as protection in their father's absence: **"Do you think a normal woman of her age would want to hang around with someone in your situation?"**[41], with Rooney later exposing the hypocrisy in Peter's judgement through Sylvia's remark: **"you can hardly object to him having an older girlfriend… Naomi is twenty-three."**[42] This comment triggers Ivan's fury, as he declares **"I actually hate you. I've hated**

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[36] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 197

[37] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 242

[38] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 248

[39] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 159

[40] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 159

[41] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 167

[42] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 211

you my entire life,"[43] to which Peter's reply, **"I know"**[44], implies a long-held awareness of the distance between them and thus marks a low point in their relationship. Ivan subsequently blocks Peter's number and the brothers fall into prolonged silence, with the narrative from Ivan's perspective laying bare the depth of his contempt: **"Fundamentally Peter is a bad person, Ivan thinks, and Ivan's own life would be in no sense worse and arguably a lot better if he never had to see or speak to him ever again."**[45] Yet Ivan simultaneously struggles with guilt, torn between his anger at Peter and his fear of dishonouring his father's memory as he contemplates **"how upset and hurt their dad would feel if he knew the situation. The sense that he was doing something to hurt his father, that he was disrespecting his memory"**[46], revealing how grief compounds rather than resolves their conflict, driving the brothers apart precisely when loss might have drawn them together.

This tension culminates in a physical confrontation when the brothers unexpectedly meet at their father's old house and a dispute over their conflicting perceptions of him escalates into violence. Peter's revelation that **"he didn't want me to be his son, he wanted me to be his protector. And yours."**[47], exposes their fundamentally different experiences of their father, provoking Ivan to lash out physically while Peter then **"grasps him by his sweatshirt, both hands, holding hard, and throws him down on the floor and pushes him down"**[48], before symbolically retreating to his mother's house seeking the parental stability he lacks. The confrontation reveals that Peter and Ivan are not mourning the same person, but "different versions of the same father"[49], a divide Rooney embeds in the very conflict between their memories of him. Ivan later confides to Margaret that **"If our dad was here it would be**

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[43] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 167

[44] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 167

[45] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 169

[46] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 255

[47] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 367

[48] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 367

[49] Balan, D. (2025) *Sally Rooney's 'Intermezzo' through the lens of loss*. Psychology Today. Available at: https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/un-numb/202509/sally-rooneys-intermezzo-through-the-lens-of-loss Accessed 21/03/26

different, but he's not here anymore."[50], highlighting his view of his father as a mediator between the two brothers, whose absence has rendered reconciliation seemingly impossible.

In the novel's conclusion, Rooney illustrates that trauma, however destructive, need not sever relationships entirely. Sylvia proposes an interconnected relationship between the three of them, with Peter and Naomi eventually agreeing that **"in the mornings he goes to work, reading, teaching. Nights she goes out with her friends he calls around to Sylvia's for dinner."**[51], with Peter later reflecting that **"all of them loved and complicatedly needed, for better or worse. Inextricable. The tangled web."**[52] While grief complicates Peter's relationships in this 'tangled web,' it ultimately reshapes rather than breaks them, suggesting that its lasting effect is not destruction but irreversible complexity.

This complexity is further deepened by Peter's invocation of Wittgenstein's concept of "language games" — the idea that words only have meaning within specific, context-dependent social activities, like how chess pieces only have meaning within the rules of chess — reinforcing the novel's recurring trope of games, revealing this as a common thread throughout the novel. Applying Wittgenstein's assertion that rigid thinking reflects "our inability to turn our eyes away from this picture"[53] Peter reflects on society's difficulty comprehending relationships that defy normative expectations, particularly in relation to his unconventional arrangement with Sylvia and Naomi. In this way, Rooney uses Wittgenstein to suggest that grief does not merely wound relationships, it can entirely destabilise the very structures of meaning through which we attempt to understand them.

Yet the novel's resolution suggests that such frameworks can be rebuilt. Peter's attendance at Ivan's chess competition becomes the site of their reconciliation, with both brothers taking accountability for the damage inflicted upon their relationship: Ivan apologises for not supporting Peter in the aftermath of Sylvia's accident and Peter **"touched, pained"**[54] forgives

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[50] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 383

[51] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 417

[52] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 436

[53] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 418

[54] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 433

him and apologises for the comments made about their father. Peter subsequently invokes their father's memory not as a source of conflict, as it had been throughout the novel, but as a foundation for renewal, allowing for an eventual resolution between the brothers. Their reconciliation suggests that grief, however destructive, can ultimately compel a reckoning as "grief rearranges the board. It forces a new game, one in which both players may finally be ready to make different moves."[55]

In the novel's final pages, Rooney's allusions crystallise Peter's emotional journey. His invocation of Gertrude's line from Shakespeare's 'Hamlet', **"Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die"**[56], is significant due to its original context: Gertrude's words are an attempt to impose a kind of order on Hamlet's grief following his father's death, but his response exposes them as a platitude, suggesting that life is far more complex than such consolations allow, encapsulating the chaos of Peter's life and his relationships during this period of grief. At this point in the novel, following all of Peter's experiences, he begins to accept the disorderly nature of his life and attempts to move forward, as evident in the subtle symbolism in his farewell to Ivan: **"Tell Margaret I'll look forward to seeing her again soon."**[57] and Ivan's response: **"I'll look forward as well."**[58], with this repetition of 'looking forward' emphasising the brothers' progression. Peter acknowledges that the inherent imperfections of life and love are also part of the experience, as he thinks **"That is life as well as loss and pain"**[59], embracing life's contradictions rather than resolving them. He also reflects on the capacity of imagination, stating **"To imagine also is life: the life that is only imagined"**[60], highlighting the mind's ability to encapsulate both the experiences of the physically near and the absent, allowing Peter to remember his father and in a way, overcome

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[55] Balan, D. (2025) *Sally Rooney's 'Intermezzo' through the lens of loss.* Psychology Today. Available at: https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/un-numb/202509/sally-rooneys-intermezzo-through-the-lens-of-loss Accessed 21/03/26

[56] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo.* London: Faber & Faber, p. 436

[57] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo.* London: Faber & Faber, p. 436

[58] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo.* London: Faber & Faber, p. 436

[59] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo.* London: Faber & Faber, p. 437

[60] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo.* London: Faber & Faber, p. 437

his death through the memories he holds. Peter's reflections come together with his final statement, **"Go on in any case living"**[61], broadly echoing Beckett's 'The Unnameable' in which the narrator is similarly driven to go on despite suffering and uncertainty, offering quiet, hard-earned endurance as the novel's closing note.

[61] Rooney, S. (2024) *Intermezzo*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 437

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