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The working class experience is complex. These three texts give the **perspectives of three different working class characters** as they embark on a new leg of their life's journey – **higher education**. Their backgrounds and experiences vary, but there are common threads that run through their stories and give us insight into the **very real experiences of working class students in the western world's top universities today**.



“It was culture as class performance, literature fetishised for its ability to take educated people on false emotional journeys, so that they might afterwards feel superior to the uneducated people whose emotional journeys they liked to read about.”
– Connell's observation in *Normal People*



Rita White – *Educating Rita* (1980)

What Does Being “Educated” Mean?

In Willy Russell's play *Educating Rita*, Frank and Rita argue over how much one should let education change them. Despite not knowing much about canonical literature, Rita has a passion and irreverence that Frank grows to admire, and even envy. While Rita wants Frank to educate her the traditional way, Frank is hesitant to subject her to what Pablo Freire called the "banking system", in which education is just the passing of information from teacher to student.

In Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History*, Classics professor Julian Morrow is put on a pedestal by his class, which ends up in a cult-like obsession causing the students to take part in strange and sometimes dangerous traditions and ceremonies. Morrow promotes a respect for elitism among the students, allowing them to justify usually immoral actions. He also leads them to believe they are perhaps more intelligent than they are due to the air of exclusivity his class carries.

In Sally Rooney's novel *Normal People*, when Connell is thinking about what Trinity will be like, he sees himself amalgamating with the stereotypical posh and educated people there, as he is well-read and passionate about his subject. He knows that wealthy people are well-educated, but later realises that this doesn't guarantee increased intelligence. While they are not smarter than their working-class peers, privately-educated students may have an inflated sense of their intelligence. Most of Connell's peers are not well-read on the topics they discuss so confidently. Books, or one's perceived knowledge of their contents, are often used to elevate one's social status.

Identity: Fitting In Versus Belonging

Rooney demonstrates how fickle the concept of identity can be when one allows it to be dictated by the people one is surrounded by. In school, **Connell** is popular and comfortable, while Marianne is the outcast. When they arrive in College, the roles reverse. Connell's background means that, at a prestigious university, he is an outsider. Lacking a sense of belonging for the first time in his life causes him to become depressed.

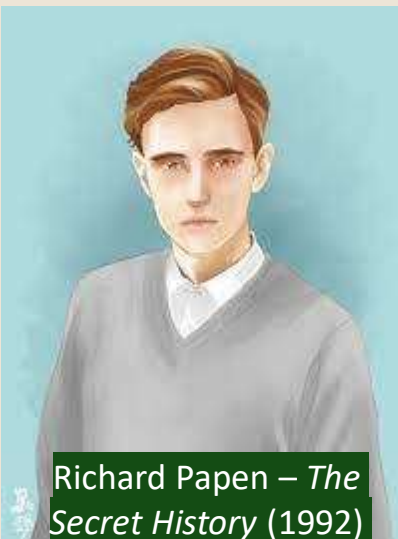
Rita comes to Frank seeking not only self-improvement, but self-transformation. When Frank argues that she comes from a "working-class culture" that deserves its own recognition, she disagrees, saying, "I don't see any culture; I just see everyone pissed or stoned tryin' to find their way from one empty day to the next". In the end, Rita gives Frank a haircut to thank him for all he's taught, reconciling her past (as a hairdresser) with her future, and no longer condemning her background.

Similarly to Rita, **Richard** thinks his full potential can only be reached through a dramatic change in his surroundings and, therefore, himself. He sets out to "fabricate a new and far more satisfying history". Throughout the story, he begins to see some of the nasty realities of wealth and power, and the moral trade-offs that are required in the pursuit of such things.

The emotional journeys characters must go on due to the class conflict in their university settings drive the plots of these novels and drive the personal development of these students.



Connell Waldron – *Normal People* (2018)



Richard Pape – *The Secret History* (1992)

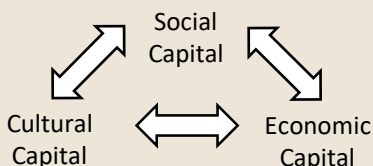
Power: Economic, Social & Cultural Capital

There is a direct link between economic, social and cultural capital in the three texts. **Connell's** economic status means that he initially has a different way of dressing, speaking and thinking to many of his new peers. This difference in cultural capital ultimately puts him in a more vulnerable position socially. The same can be said for **Richard** except, unlike Connell, he is much more aware of his lack of capital from the beginning. Similarly, **Rita** perceives herself to have less power socially due to her economic and cultural background.

The characters' social capital, or lack thereof, is a recurring issue. Social capital is gained through networks and engaging in seemingly advantageous relationships. It may be fiction, but the prevalence of social capital in universities is very real. According to a 2013 study in the University of Bristol, both working class and middle class students are acutely aware of their social capital, know its advantages, and understand the consequences of lacking it. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that social capital may even be more important than cultural capital (education, intellect, clothing) in achieving success.

The impact of social capital can be illustrated in a characters' confidence when expressing opinions, breaking the law and mistreating others. All of these actions have different, sometimes lesser consequences the more social capital a person or character has.

In *Normal People*, Connell makes the observation that, at his new college, literature is not only studied to be enjoyed or to be learned from, but to increase one's cultural capital. Similarly, in *The Secret History*, the students, while passion for academia seems genuine, are in competition with each other to appear more intelligent in order to increase their power within the group. This attitude is internalised by the protagonist in *Educating Rita*. Rita measures her value by her cultural capital.



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