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The Unread Message as a Literary Device Silence, Anticipation and Meaning in Contemporary English Fiction

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Originality statement. This article advances a focused analytical category—*digital narrative gap*—rather than claiming that digital communication or literary silence has never been studied. Existing scholarship on Rooney already addresses digital communication, discontinuity, intimacy and silence; the present paper narrows the inquiry to the narrative function of delayed, unanswered, unread and deleted messages. The manuscript is independently written, but similarity screening and verification against the exact editions used for submission remain necessary.

Abstract--Digital communication has altered not only everyday interaction but also the formal resources available to contemporary fiction. This article examines the unread, delayed and unanswered message as a narrative device rather than treating digital communication merely as a thematic marker of technological modernity. Focusing on Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*, *Normal People* and *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, the study asks how technological delay turns absence into an observable and narratively productive condition. Recent scholarship has already demonstrated the importance of emails, texts and online communication in Rooney's fiction (McAteer 1–25; Zhou and Huo). It has also connected Rooney's fragmented communication with vulnerability, alienation and self-surveillance (Carregal-Romero 213–233). Building on that scholarship without reproducing its arguments, this article proposes the concept of the *digital narrative gap*: the space between a sent communication and its uncertain communicative completion. The article argues that this gap possesses three formal properties—technological visibility, temporal pressure and interpretive uncertainty. Because a digital message may be marked as sent or delivered while remaining unanswered, silence acquires a material trace and a heightened expectation of immediacy. The reader is consequently placed in a position of waiting and interpretation alongside the character. The study concludes that Rooney's digital communication is most significant not simply because characters use contemporary technology, but because technology changes the literary meaning of delay, silence and relational uncertainty.

Keywords-- digital narrative gap; unread message; digital silence; Sally Rooney; non-communication; narrative temporality; reader-response; mediated intimacy

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication technologies have repeatedly changed literary form. The letter, diary, telegram and telephone each created new possibilities for representing distance, secrecy, intimacy and delay. Contemporary fiction inherits these possibilities while adding a particularly visible form of mediated communication: the digital message. Unlike a traditional letter, a digital message may carry an observable status. It can be sent, delivered, opened, answered, ignored or deleted. The technological interface therefore turns an apparently ordinary communicative act into a sequence of narratively legible states.

The literary significance of this sequence becomes clearest when the expected response does not arrive. A sender who has written a message may be left waiting; the recipient's silence can become an object of interpretation; and the reader may be positioned between the two. The unanswered message consequently has a peculiar double status. It is a completed linguistic object but an incomplete social act.

Existing criticism on Sally Rooney has established that digital communication is central to her representation of contemporary relationships. McAteer's study of *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* examines text messages and emails in relation to digitalisation, Irish locality and digital capitalism (1–25). Zhou and Huo similarly describe email, texting, instant messaging and Facebook posts as structural components of *Conversations with Friends*, arguing that Rooney's integration of online communication contributes to the novel's distinctive narrative form. Carregal-Romero's discussion of Rooney further links fragmented communication, silence and vulnerability (213–233).

The present study does not dispute these findings. Instead, it isolates a more specific formal question: what happens when the narrative emphasis shifts from the message itself to the uncertain space after it has been sent? The paper proposes that this space can be theorised as a *digital narrative gap*. The concept describes a narratively productive interval in which communication has been initiated but its completion remains uncertain.

The argument is deliberately modest. It does not claim that unread messages have never appeared in fiction, nor that Rooney is the first writer to represent non-communication. Its contribution lies in identifying the combination of visibility, immediacy and uncertainty produced by digital communication and in demonstrating how those features can alter narrative temporality and reader participation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on digital literary culture has moved beyond the idea that technology is merely a subject represented by contemporary writers. Digital media can shape narrative structure, voice, temporality and the presentation of character. In Rooney studies, this formal dimension is particularly evident.

McAteer argues that text messages and emails permeate Rooney's first two novels and shape how characters relate to one another while also registering Ireland's globalised digital environment (1–25). His analysis is valuable for the present study because it treats digital communication as part of the novels' social and political structure rather than as decorative realism.

Zhou and Huo offer a cross-media analysis of *Conversations with Friends* and note that Rooney allows readers to encounter online communication directly, including the visible process of composing and revising messages. They reproduce the important instant-message breakup exchange between Frances and Nick and locate it at page 120 of the 2017 novel (Zhou and Huo). Their discussion demonstrates that digital communication can become part of the novel's narrative architecture rather than merely its setting.

Carregal-Romero places Rooney's communication problems within a broader account of neoliberal subjectivity and vulnerability. The chapter's discussion of Frances emphasises the relationship between screen-mediated expression and control, including the ability to construct and revise a written self (213–233). This scholarship provides a necessary foundation for considering the digital message as a site of both disclosure and emotional distance.

Recent scholarship therefore establishes three important premises: digital communication is formally significant in Rooney; digital forms can intensify ambiguity and self-consciousness; and silence or communicative failure is closely connected with vulnerability.

The research gap addressed here lies in bringing these premises together around one precise object—the unread or unanswered message—and asking what narrative work is performed by the interval between sending and response.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does the unread or unanswered digital message function as a narrative device in contemporary English fiction?
2. How does digital non-response differ formally from conventional literary silence?
3. How does technological delay create narrative temporality and suspense?
4. How does the unread message alter the reader's position from observer to participant in waiting?
5. How can the concept of the digital narrative gap contribute to the study of contemporary digital literary form?

IV. OBJECTIVES

The study seeks to conceptualise the unread message as a literary device; identify the formal properties of digital non-response; analyse delay and waiting as narrative temporality; examine the relationship between mediated communication and intimacy; and propose the digital narrative gap as a transferable analytical category for future studies of contemporary fiction.

V. METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

The article uses qualitative close reading supported by narrative theory and scholarship on digital communication. The primary corpus is deliberately limited to three novels by Sally Rooney: *Conversations with Friends* (2017), *Normal People* (2018) and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021). The selection allows comparison among short-form messaging, email correspondence and shifts between mediated and face-to-face communication.

The analysis concentrates on five formal features: (1) the message as an incomplete communicative act; (2) delay between sending and response; (3) visible traces of digital communication; (4) deletion or disappearance; and (5) the reader's interpretation of missing responses. The study does not attempt a quantitative survey of all digital fiction. Its purpose is theoretical and interpretive: to formulate and test a concept through a focused corpus.



VI. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM NARRATIVE GAP TO DIGITAL NARRATIVE GAP

Narrative gaps are fundamental to literary interpretation because texts routinely leave information unstated. Readers infer motives, connect temporal fragments and interpret omissions. Digital communication introduces a technologically mediated version of this familiar literary process.

A conventional narrative gap may concern an event the narrator does not describe. A digital narrative gap instead concerns an event whose communicative status remains unresolved. A message may be fully visible to the reader while the recipient's response remains absent. The gap is therefore located not simply inside the story's information but between two communicative states.

The concept proposed here has three defining properties. First, **technological visibility**: digital systems can leave traces of communication, making absence unusually observable. Second, **temporal pressure**: digital communication is culturally associated with rapid response, so delay can acquire significance. Third, **interpretive uncertainty**: the reason for non-response is often unavailable, forcing characters and readers to infer.

These properties distinguish digital narrative gaps from ordinary silence without claiming that they replace older forms of silence. Rather, digital technology gives an old literary problem—uncertain communication—a new formal surface.

VII. DIGITAL SILENCE AND THE PARADOX OF IMMEDIACY

Digital communication promises immediacy while making delay psychologically conspicuous. A letter can take days to arrive because delay is built into the medium. A text message, by contrast, is normally expected to arrive almost instantaneously. Once the technology reduces transmission time, the interval before a reply becomes newly interpretable.

This produces a paradox of immediacy: the faster the medium, the more meaningful a delay may become. The sender may ask whether the recipient has seen the message, chosen not to answer, forgotten to answer or deliberately postponed the response. The technology does not eliminate uncertainty; it can intensify it.

In literary representation, this uncertainty creates pacing. A narrative can pause around a missing reply without requiring a conventional dramatic scene. Waiting itself becomes an event. The unanswered message can therefore function as a temporal hinge connecting one scene to another.

VIII. CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS: DIGITAL INTIMACY AND CONTROLLED EXPRESSION

Conversations with Friends provides a particularly useful case because the novel combines face-to-face conversation with emails, texts and instant messages. Zhou and Huo note that digital communication is integrated directly into the narrative and that readers can observe characters' online exchanges as part of the storyworld. Their analysis identifies the instant-message breakup between Frances and Nick and cites the relevant passage at page 120 of Rooney's novel.

The formal importance of the exchange is not limited to its content. The digital format alters the emotional conditions under which the characters communicate. Frances can formulate a response on screen without the immediate bodily pressure of face-to-face interaction. The screen therefore offers control, but control can coexist with vulnerability.

McAtter's analysis is helpful here because it places digital communication within the wider social and political structure of Rooney's fiction (1–25). The present study extends that approach by examining what happens when communication is left incomplete. If the message is a controlled attempt to express the self, the absent response returns uncertainty to the sender.

The novel's ending is especially revealing. The final movement from mediated exchanges toward a telephone conversation suggests that communication technologies do not have identical emotional functions. The shift from short digital forms to spoken conversation can be read as a formal movement away from controlled textual distance and toward a more exposed mode of contact.

IX. NORMAL PEOPLE: WAITING, MISREADING AND RELATIONAL UNCERTAINTY

In *Normal People*, communication is repeatedly shaped by hesitation and misunderstanding. Digital messages allow Connell and Marianne to maintain contact while also preserving the possibility of ambiguity. Their communication illustrates the difference between having a channel of contact and achieving mutual understanding.

The digital message is especially important because it can be reread. A spoken sentence disappears into the immediate interaction; a written message remains available for inspection. The receiver can revisit punctuation, wording and timing. Consequently, the message becomes an object of interpretation rather than a momentary utterance.



This creates a second paradox: digital communication can increase communicative permanence while increasing interpretive instability. The more available the message becomes for rereading, the more possibilities the reader-character may discover within it.

The narrative importance of the unanswered or delayed message therefore lies in its ability to transform a small technological interval into a psychological event. A missing reply can alter the character's understanding of the relationship even before any explicit explanation arrives.

X. BEAUTIFUL WORLD, WHERE ARE YOU: EMAIL AND DEFERRED INTIMACY

Beautiful World, Where Are You shifts from short messages toward sustained email correspondence. This change matters because the email can accommodate a more extended construction of self. The characters can reflect, revise and organise their thoughts before sending them.

The long email creates a different form of digital temporality. It is immediate in transmission but slower in composition. It therefore occupies an intermediate position between the instant message and the traditional letter.

This form of communication may be called *deferred intimacy*: the characters reveal substantial aspects of themselves through writing while remaining physically separated. The medium allows intimacy to be constructed at a distance, but the distance also prevents immediate correction of misunderstanding.

The novel consequently supports the broader claim of this article: digital media do not simply modernise the epistolary form. They reorganise its relationship with time, presence and expectation.

XI. THE UNREAD MESSAGE AS A NEGATIVE EVENT

A narrative event is conventionally understood as something that happens. The unanswered message introduces a different structure: something expected fails to happen. The absence of the response nevertheless changes the course of the story.

The unread message can therefore be described as a *negative event*. Its narrative force comes from non-occurrence. A character waits; another character speculates; the reader anticipates. The absence becomes causally productive.

This formulation helps distinguish the digital narrative gap from a simple plot omission. An omitted event may be unavailable to the reader.

In a digital narrative gap, the missing response is itself foregrounded by the presence of the original message. The text draws attention to the absence.

XII. DELETION AND THE DIGITAL AFTERLIFE OF MESSAGES

Deletion adds another layer to the problem of presence and absence. A message can be written, sent and later removed, producing a split between what once existed and what remains accessible. The sender may remember the text even after its visible trace disappears.

Such deletion creates what can be called a *digital afterlife*. The message survives psychologically after it has ceased to survive materially on the screen. This resembles older literary forms of memory and textual haunting while remaining specific to the reversible nature of digital writing.

Deletion also complicates narrative knowledge. A reader may know that a message was deleted without knowing its exact contents. The missing text then becomes a second-order narrative gap: the narrative tells us that something has disappeared, and the disappearance itself becomes meaningful.

XIII. READER PARTICIPATION AND THE CULTURE OF WAITING

The digital narrative gap changes the reader's temporal position. When the recipient has not answered, the reader may also wait for the explanation. The reader becomes structurally aligned with the sender's uncertainty.

This can be represented as: *sender writes* → *message exists* → *response is expected* → *response is delayed or absent* → *reader interprets the gap*. The reader is therefore not merely receiving information but performing a form of digital inference.

Contemporary readers bring everyday knowledge of messaging culture to this process. They understand that a delay may be accidental, emotional, strategic or hostile. Fiction can exploit this shared cultural knowledge without explaining every technological implication. The digital narrative gap thus depends upon a reader who is already familiar with the affective grammar of waiting.

XIV. DISCUSSION

The three novels demonstrate different versions of digitally mediated communication. *Conversations with Friends* foregrounds short messages and the contrast between screen-mediated control and direct conversation.



Normal People shows how messaging can sustain contact while leaving emotional meaning unstable. *Beautiful World, Where Are You* develops the longer email as a form of deferred intimacy.

Across these differences, one formal principle remains consistent: communication creates meaning not only through what is said but through what remains unresolved. The digital medium makes that unresolved condition unusually visible and temporally charged.

The paper's contribution is therefore not to argue that Rooney writes about technology. That point is already well established. The contribution is to argue that digital communication changes the formal behaviour of silence. Silence becomes attached to traces, timestamps, expectation and rereading. The result is a narrative form in which absence can become more visible than presence.

XV. CONCLUSION

The unread and unanswered message deserves sustained attention as a literary device because it transforms a familiar technological experience into a formal mechanism of narrative uncertainty. In Rooney's fiction, digital communication is not merely a realistic detail of twenty-first-century life. It is part of the architecture through which characters negotiate intimacy, vulnerability, control and distance.

The concept of the *digital narrative gap* provides a focused vocabulary for this phenomenon. It identifies the interval in which a message has been produced but communication has not yet achieved a stable conclusion. Technological visibility, temporal pressure and interpretive uncertainty make this interval narratively productive.

The study also shows that the unread message is not simply a symbol of loneliness. It is a dynamic structure of waiting. It can generate suspense, alter character perception, encourage rereading and position the reader inside the uncertainty of the fictional relationship.

Future research can test the concept against a larger corpus of contemporary fiction, including novels involving WhatsApp, Instagram, dating applications, voice notes and disappearing messages. A comparative study could also place the digital narrative gap beside the epistolary delay of earlier fiction. Such work would establish whether digital non-response is best understood as a new literary device or as a historically transformed version of an older narrative problem.

The central proposition of this article remains deliberately precise: when technology makes communication visible, it can also make non-communication visible. Contemporary fiction turns that visibility into form.

XVI. RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION AT A GLANCE

Dimension	Contribution of the present study
Object of study	Unread, delayed, unanswered and deleted digital messages
Research gap	Moves from digital communication as theme/context to non-response as narrative mechanism
Core concept	Digital narrative gap
Formal properties	Technological visibility; temporal pressure; interpretive uncertainty
Reader effect	Places the reader in a position of waiting and inference
Corpus	Three Sally Rooney novels across short messaging and email forms
Future applicability	Can be tested in wider contemporary digital fiction



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