Triangular Desire in Jane Austen's Novels

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Abstract: All Austen's novels analysed in this article are about preparing for marriage. Happiness in marriage very much depends on one's ethics before getting married. Her approach to marriage is dominated by societal codes. In other words, in many ways she is an upholder of the values of her own society. For Austen, life before marriage is a kind of rite de passage in order to find out who is worthy of happiness in marriage. Austen's understanding of marriage is different to Denis De Rougemont's as there is neither a critique of a negative attitude towards marriage nor a critique of the institution of marriage, as such.

Austen's novels are mainly about rivalry in love. The fascination of the other is so strong because one wants what the other wants and thereby gets caught up in the other's desire. No amount of good breeding or upholding high moral standards can stop rivalry taking place among the characters. As the triangular love structure is a folly which even the most well-bred person cannot escape, the only freedom in lovemaking seems to be to suffer and, in the meantime, be able to wait until circumstances change and the right moment appears. To help us further our understanding of the love configurations in Austen's novels, it may be helpful to introduce René Girard's structure of triangular desire.

Keywords: Triangular desire, rivalry, marriage, The other, Girard, De Rougemont

Denis De Rougemont's book *Love in the Western World* contains a historical and chronological analysis of the Western concept of love, from the myth of Tristan and Iseult and up until the early 20th century. According to De Rougemont, the Tristan myth expresses a love for love, not a love for the other person involved in lovemaking. It is a narcissistic love in which the lover's self-magnification is emphasised more than the relationship with their beloved (Rougemont, 1974, 260). According to De Rougemont, the love described in Romance literature is a love through obstacles, even of obstacles. If there were no obstacles, there would be no love. So, in reality, there is no love, only love of obstacles.

De Rougemont adds that within such a masochistic realm of love of obstacles, there is a pathological fear of falling in love in a simple, straightforward manner (Rougemont, 1974, 268), and this myth was bound to change attitudes towards adultery in the West (Rougemont, 1974, 276), which he sees, among other things, as materialised contempt for marriage (Rougemont, 1974, 275). This myth, which De Rougemont calls the *passion myth*, magnifies and divinises unhappy, non-sensual love and is actually a love of nothingness, of death (Rougemont, 1974, 38 ff). According to De Rougemont, dualism about Eros being both divine and, at the same time, a frenzy, is a Platonic legacy (Rougemont, 1974, 61). This dualism in love became common in 12th century France, at the very time the country was invaded by dualistic religion. This sparked a powerful rise of the cult of love (Rougemont, 1974, 112). De Rougemont states that it was in this century that marriage became an object of contempt. Instead, passion became glorified (Rougemont, 1974, 71). Yielding to a purely physical sensuality was the supreme and original sin, and to love with pure passion was a pure virtue (Rougemont, 1974, 135).

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics Vol. 48, No. 4, Winter 2025 [43-54]

Jane Austen and Marriage

De Rougemont's claim that in the Western world there is a fear of falling in love in a simple, straightforward manner, is also somewhat evident in Austen's novels regarding money, status, education etc., but, on the other hand, there is little contempt for the institution of marriage, even if there are many examples of somebody marrying mostly for money and wealth. While for De Rougemont, the obstacles come from imitating bad models, for Austen, obstacles in love stem from a combination of materialism and insincerity. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Collins' view on love and marriage, for example, is strongly criticised by Elizabeth Bennet as it is complete complacency. His "love" for the Bennet sisters is pure imagination and he is therefore barely hurt when Elizabeth refuses him (Austen, 1979, 153). The fact that he marries on the orders of Lady Catherine de Burgh also reveals a total subordinance towards the influence of the aristocracy.

This tendency to marry for convenience and money is strong in both sexes as men at the time were dependent on a woman's dowry. There is clearly a certain pragmatism concerning marriage. The narrator, however, constantly reminds the reader that there must be a profound sense of love, otherwise one will end up unhappy. It is therefore questionable that marriage for Austen is, as Hazel Jones claims, primarily about money (2009, 5). Mr. Collins may be ridiculed for his numerous attempts to marry, but, from Austen's point of view in general, it is a somewhat better alternative than remaining unmarried for life. Jane, who is more conventional than Elizabeth, views marriage from a more generous and pragmatic perspective and claims that Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas will probably be happy together (Austen, 1979, 174).

If we see the development of the passion myth as a gradual decay of marriage, it seems to have had little direct influence on Austen. However, if we read Jane Austen's novels in light of De Rougemont's analysis of love in general in the Western world, love is surely seen through obstacles. However, the obstacles are mainly obstacles before being liberated by marriage. The triangular love structure in Austen's novels can be interpreted as a folly, which even the most well-bred person cannot escape.

In Austen's case, the obstacles or requirements, mainly confined to class, breeding and learning, bear little critique, overall, of marriage as an institution. But those who manage to emerge relatively unscathed from the pre-marriage period seem to have the best chance of succeeding in living in a happy marriage.

René Girard's Concept of Triangular Desire

To help us further an understanding of the love configurations in Austen's novels, it may be helpful to introduce René Girard's structure of triangular desire. Girard was an enthusiastic reader of Austen's novels (Taylor, 2022, 204), and this is likely attributable to a common understanding of desire as triangular. In Girard's literary reflection in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, the most common denominator in the European novelistic tradition is the revelation of desire (Girard, 1965). He sees desire taking place between subject, object and mediator as the most fundamental formation, and labels it *triangular desire*. Desire is therefore something relational. If desire were something inherent in the subject, it would be possible to attain both harmony and autonomy. Then desire would be something original and individual (Jørgensen, 1990, 44–45). Desire, purely object-related, would be based on a spontaneous attraction towards different objects, such as money, houses, cars, etc. Contrary to these views, Girard sees desire as mediated through what other people desire. There is no such thing as original desire, only mediated desire. Mediated or mimetic desire is contrasted to spontaneous desire and comes about when the hero desires an object via a mediator. If desire were not afflicted by a mediator, there could be some possibility of desiring freely. But as long as there is a mediator present, there cannot be any linear desire. The mediator becomes the third party who catches the desire of the subject. They receive and hinder desire and usually end up in intense rivalry with the subject.

Thus, the difference between the romantic novelist and the Romanesque or realist novelist is based on their different approaches to the mediator.[1] The romantic writer will show and propagate the mediator's presence, often as a rival. But they will not reveal the mediator's role in changing the hero's desire. The romantic writer believes in the autonomy of the characters and, according to Girard, is himself governed by a desire for autonomy (Girard, 1965, see Chapter 1). The romantic lie therefore consists of seeing desire as spontaneous and linear. The realist novelist both presents and reveals the role of the mediator as he is, according to Girard, a trustworthy explorer of desire, a desire which Girard labels *desire according to the other*.

The starting point of mimetic desire is the discovery of human weakness. The concept of internal weakness seems initially to be tinged by existentialistic thought, but the process is understood differently since the emphasis is on the other. This inner weakness can very easily lead to different kinds of possessive reactions towards one's mediator. When the mediator becomes both model and hinderer, he will begin to desire, especially in the long term, what the the mediator will redirect from the object to the subject. This structure whereby both the subject and the mediator desire each other's desires is called *double mediation* – which clearly intensifies the rivalry. In the process, the subject and mediator become increasingly alike, while they frantically profess their differences. Mimetic desire makes people profess their uniqueness while, at the same time, there is a tendency to become each other's double. Desire, in other words, leads to sameness.

According to Girard, Dostoevsky, especially in *The Eternal Husband*, reveals the mechanism of double mediation (Girard, 1987, 338–347). In the process of intense rivalry, desire is transformed, often to such a radical degree that one loses sight of the original object. Ultimately all desires point towards the mediator. Triangular desire, although the most fundamental and most common desire – especially in the context of loveless love – is just one of numerous variations, but it is also the most probable one.[2] In a group of four, for example, the chances of being left out diminishes – as in all other numbers, except three. This case of numbering, of people involved, however, has no real bearing on the Girardian concept of rivalry, although it is, however, interesting to note that the triangle is not established by chance when describing desire and rivalry. The triangle is clearly the most common number when expressing conflictual desires as the urge to attain love by imitating someone produces scarcity and makes rivalry unavoidable.

Even if the triangular structure is basic, it means that desire forms a number of different structures. I therefore disagree with James Alison when he claims that all desire is triangular (Alison, 1998, 9). Mimetic desire contains all kinds of imitation of the other, in an endless complexity of interdividual desires. It is like the germs described in Raskolnikov's dream, spreading out into infinity, and turning everyone affected into deceitful doubles. Thus, the structure can become more complex, more plural than the triangular structure described in this analysis. In the case of Austen, however, desirous love is often presented in triangular constellations, indicating the dominance of triangular desire. Her goal, however, is to dissolve the triangular structure in order to reach the ideal of oneness in marriage.

In Austen's novels, the triangular structure makes rivalry inevitable, as there will be at least one desiring party whose desires will not be fulfilled. The paradox, though, is that in triangular desire, absolutely all parties become losers as the process intensifies. Austen, like both Proust and Dostoevsky, places the mediator in the foreground and relegates the object to the background (Girard, 1965, 45). In other words, they transform object-related desires into secondary and rivalistic desires. As the desire between subject, object and mediator is based on desire according to somebody else's desires, it makes desire acquisitive and violent in nature (Girard, 1986, 145).

Rivalry within the Bennet Family

Austen's description of love differs from the cultural avantgarde and the growing radicalisation and liberalism of the 19th century. Her description of love as loyalty to societal codes makes her both conventional and unique. The process of the breaking up of moral values is still very sparse in any of

Austen's novels. If, however, there is a breaking up of traditional Christian values, they emerge, not through any new ethical ideal or through any contemplation of a meaningless existence, but through rivalry. Rivalry seems to destroy a simple linear development. Any indication of a straight-line structure in Austen's novels seems rare. The reason why the linear model is distorted, however, does not stem from the author outlining a number of different alternatives to marriage, but from rivalry in general in lovemaking. Unhappy love relationships are therefore a starting point in this analysis.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the structure of desire is less complicated than in some of her other novels. All the aims in life of Austen's characters are initially simple and straightforward, and in no character is the norm of getting married more predominant than in Mrs. Bennet. Getting married is the means of achieving a secure life, both emotionally and economically – even if Mrs. and Mr. Bennet are not happily married. Thus, the source in this novel, which designs the broken structure of lovemaking, springs from the ruins of the marriage of Mrs. and Mr. Bennet. In other words, the broken symmetry begins with the parents. Mr. Bennet has no respect for his wife. He ridicules her in front of his children, and he laughs ironically at Catherine and Lydia, his two youngest daughters. The children's deficiencies can be attributed to bad manners and can be interpreted as the legacy of Mrs. and Mr. Bennet's personal deficiencies. Austen calls them "the unhappy defects" of her family (Austen, 1979, 24). The youngest children are unable to stop being silly. Elizabeth, especially, feels the burden of upholding the family's respectability as her parents and younger sisters fail so miserably.

In the episode where Lydia elopes with Wickham, Austen claims the family is *deranged, a father absent, a mother incapable of exertion, and requiring constant attendance* (Austen, 1979, 297). Beneath all the fuss there is a certain melancholy hanging over the family, created by the parents' very different views on life. Austen goes as far as to indicate that Mr. Bennet's esteem, respect and confidence has vanished forever (Austen, 1979, 262). Elizabeth, being the only one who outwardly feels ashamed of her family's lack of tact, is also the most vulnerable to the scorn of others (Wiltshire, 2006, 6). In the scene where Mary Bennet sings at a party, her weak and affected singing becomes a sign of her bad and sloppy upbringing (Austen, 1979, 142).

Mr. Bennet's semi-solitude seems initially to come from him being married to a (once) sexually attractive but unintelligent woman (Austen, 1979, 262). The fact that Mr. Bennet had once been captivated by his wife's youth and beauty (*SuperSummary,* 2018, 127) is one of many examples in Austen's novels of how desire deceives love. His irritation is manifested in constant irony. He takes refuge in mockery and abdicates in his role of father (Tanner, 1979, 27–28). It is indicated that abdication concerning parenthood has come about gradually or fairly late, as his three youngest children are poorly raised while Jane and Elizabeth have been brought up to a higher standard. The view that Catherine and Lydia are like their mother, while Jane and Elizabeth are like their father (Austen, 1979, 76), is relatively misleading. The eldest sisters are without their father's cynicism and, in tune with their mother's marriage ideals, are completely ready to undergo all the rituals that marriage entails. However, Jane and Elizabeth are not silly. In each of their way, both of them have the capacity required to rise according to the demands of society. None of the five sisters, however, pass Darcy's criteria in which a woman should have thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing and the modern languages to deserve to be called *accomplished* (Austen, 1979, 84–85).

The way in which Elizabeth catches her father's affection is a typically mild and familiar form of triangular desire. The fact that Mrs. and Mr. Bennet always take different sides reveals the tense and frustrating atmosphere in the family, which partially explains the younger girl's silliness. That Elizabeth always catches her father's affection while she is her mother's least loved child denotes a typically mild form of triangular desire. The fact that Elizabeth was the least dear to Mrs. Bennet's children (Austen, 1979, 145) is actually a sign of Elizabeth's intellectual capacity, rising as she does from her mediocre family background. Her sense of shame causes her to feel resentment towards her mother and younger sisters. The resentment goes both ways. When the two oldest Bennet sisters are caught out in the rain, Mrs. Bennet does not care if Jane catches cold as long as she is able to get

engaged to Mr. Bingley. (Austen, 1979, 77). This madness of class subordination verges on cruelty and a general lack of love.

Mr. Bennet seems not to really know his daughters. He has a rather unclear understanding of the rivalries going on in his family. Neither parents have any idea of Lydia's negative development. Her vulgar claim that she belongs to a higher level of society than Jane as she now is married (Austen, 1979, 329) really sums up a kind of breeding that has gone awfully wrong. Also, Mr. Bennet's claim that if Jane marries, Elizabeth will not be satisfied by being outdone by her sister (Austen, 1979, 176) reveals that he does not understand the strong unity and non-rivalistic closeness between the two eldest sisters.

The same constellation of a family in disarray is found in Austen's *Persuasion*. In *Persuasion*, the Elliot family is smaller and less intimate than the Bennet family. Sir Walter's wife died 14 years ago, and he is completely incapable of running a family. He has become a kind of ally to Elizabeth, his oldest daughter, with no special affection towards either of the three sisters, Anne the least of all.

While the seeds of unhappy relationships in *Pride and Prejudice* stem from the Bennet parent's rather unhappy marriage, the unhappiness in *Persuasion* emanates from Sir Walter's narcissism and extreme snobbism (Austen, 2004 Vol. 1, 10). His lack of depth produces a materialistic worldview in which his oldest daughter is devoid of compassion, his second daughter is totally engrossed in her more or less imaginary illnesses, and Anne, due to her father taking no interest in her (Austen, 2004, Vol 1, 11), thereby, by the paradoxical freedom and strength of being a nobody, finds more life-giving values and models.

Triangular Desire in *Pride and Prejudice*

In *Pride and Prejudice*, conventional erotic rivalry is limited to Darcy and Wickham, and Darcy and Elizabeth. The triangular structure between Darcy, Wickham and Elizabeth may seem fairly loose due to the distance and the lack of direct encounters. This initial looseness, however, intensifies and gets more dramatic when one gets to know the background of Darcy and Mr. Wickham. Wickham has been the elder Mr. Darcy's favourite (Austen, 1979, 123–124) but from childhood on has also been jealous of Darcy's position in society. The rivalry between Darcy and Wickham stems from envy, an envy which goes both ways. That Wickham is preferred by Darcy's father seems to indicate that he is more likeable. The familiar triangle, however, is transposed into erotic rivalry later in life. Wickham, in his jealousy towards Darcy, claims all Darcy's actions come down to pride. The narrator tells us that Darcy's melancholy and arrogance stem from a fear of ridicule (Austen, 1979, 124), while his pride stems from a very strong desire for autonomy. When Bingley makes fun of Darcy, Darcy gets offended and tries to hide it (Austen, 1979, 95). Elizabeth watches Darcy's reactions and finds him not to be a real gentleman, as a gentleman to Elizabeth is first and foremost a man with a good heart.

Wickham does not intensify the triangular rivalry as he is not informed about Darcy's growing feelings for Elizabeth. Elizabeth is initially clearly attracted to Wickham until she is confronted with his lies about the past and his attempt to elope with Georgina, Darcy's sister, when she was only a young girl (Austen, 1979, 231). This background check implies a tighter triangular setting consisting of Wickham, Georgina and Darcy. But because it belongs to the past, it has limited immediate impact on the general story. Also, Jane Austen seldom lets the past come back and haunt you.

Elizabeth is superficially attracted to Wickham. She thinks with pleasure of dancing a great deal with him (Austen, 1979, 129). Despite her knowing that Mr. Bennet does not approve of Wickham, she confesses that Wickham is the most agreeable man she ever saw (Austen, 1979, 181). Austen writes that *Elizabeth went away with her head full of him. She could think of nothing but of Mr. Wickham, and of what he had told her…* (Austen, 1979, 127). However, Austen does not follow up on describing these feelings as they are shallow and, from the start, she is attracted to Darcy in a kind of love-hate way.

As Wickham is no great catch – due to money and birth – Austen focuses on desires among the rich and powerful. While there is much discussion about money in Jane Austen's novels, it does not mean that desire is more intense compared to modern novels. Money functions as a kind of emotional regulator to all the desire that is taking place. Thus, the outward display of wealth, so vividly described, actually makes Austen's novels less desirous. Nowhere in her novels do you find a rivalry so deep that it reaches a "hellish" existence. Desire never reaches such an interior and intense level that even money stops being a temptation. The fact that the protagonists in Austen's novels never give up their worldly roles means that, unlike, for example, in Dostoevsky, there is never any apocalyptic ending where disregard for money either indicates the highest degree of spirituality or the lowest degradation towards madness.

The main reason Elizabeth gets so infatuated with Wickham is his intimate knowledge of Darcy. That Wickham is capable of charming other people is made very clear at the end of the novel where Mr. Bennet says that of his three sons-in-law, Wickham is his favourite (Austen, 1979, 387). This reveals both Wickham's and Mr. Bennet's shallowness and, in relation to Mr. Bennet's carelessness, discloses a certain penchant for destructiveness as Wickham nearly managed to ruin the Bennet's respectability. The fact that both Darcy's father and his father-in-law prefer Wickham not only tells us a lot about Wickham's ability to be liked, but that Mr. Bennet's bad marriage may subconsciously have caused a desire to subvert his family's values.

Triangular Desire in *Persuasion*

In Austen, the individual is reluctant to intensify the desires unleashed by mimesis. Rivalry in Austen's novels tends to be dissolved by the force of society's norms, even when the entanglement is tight and threatens to break up relations. In *Persuasion*, the initial triangle between Charles Musgrove, Mary and Anne has evolved into friendliness. Charles had first proposed to Anne before he got married to Mary. Desire among the three, however, is so familiar and loose that they freely talk about it (Austen, 2004 Vol 1, Chapter X, 75), showing great realism in how relations work.

However, in *Persuasion,* as in so many of Austen's writings, not even the heroine is freed from getting entangled in triangular relations. According to Matthew Taylor, the other's influence on each other is at the centre of Austen's novel (Taylor, 2004, 110) Everyone seems to display what Freud calls "intact narcissism". However, Austen reveals this belief in the self as highly illusory as she shows that one's choices stem from the other. Wentworth especially seems hindered in lovemaking by his imitation of manly pride. The same can be said of William Elliot. Initially, Elliot becomes a rival of Captain Wentworth in order to win Anne. This could look like a serious triangular scene built on jealousy and money, but Elliot`s rivalry is soon exposed as shallowness and greed as his infatuation is too much of a game. If emotions become "dangerous", William Elliot will withdraw from any fight. However, it seems that Mr. Elliot lavishes in soft rivalry. He interferes time after time in conversations between Anne and Wentworth, not because of his love for Anne, but from a combination of rivalistic desire and greed. This rivalry never becomes a life and death issue. He is too superficial, cunning and egoistic to let it evolve into something dangerous. Also, the triangular structure is already broken down and feelings subdued by the information given to Anne by Mrs. Smith about how despicable a person William Elliot really is.

On the other hand, Wentworth's attempt to overcome his deep feelings for Anne could, if circumstances were ripe, wreck his life through triangular entanglement. But, as in so many of Austen's books, the characters are saved from misery by upholding societal codes.

In the main triangular rivalry in *Persuasion*, Wentworth uses Louisa's infatuation in him to make Anne desperately jealous (Austen, 2004, Vol. I, Chapter X, 69–78). However, this amorous relationship succeeds in making Anne jealous, but it also backfires on Wentworth himself, making him increasingly desperate, understanding that he does not care for Louisa at all (Austen, 2004, Vol II, Chapter XI, 195).

Both Anne and Wenworth suffer from pride while their triangular relationships deny them any genuine happiness. The thought of going directly to the desired object cannot be achieved as long as no one renounces their pride. The object of desire seems impossible to reach. Therefore, both cling to playing games, games that seem to evolve into inner torture, for both of them. There is, however, a development in Wentworth. He seems to become so desperate that he gives up playing amorous games. By gradually letting go of his foolish pride, he becomes capable of revealing his deep feelings for Anne.

Wentworth tries to conquer Anne by pretending to make Louisa a mediator for his love, but fails because of Anne's rather anti-mimetic response. The more Wentworth flirts with Louisa, the more he feels attached to Anne. Anne, instead of creating rivalry, chooses to suffer and bear the pain, making no attempt at making Wentworth jealous, ultimately creating a free space for love, when all the obstacles suddenly subside.

In the triangular configurations consisting of Anne, Wentworth and Louisa, feelings have turned into emotional stagnation. Every step is blocked by the other. Austen displays here a wonderful insight into how relations change through the triangular structure. Her gradual understanding of such a structure made her change the ending, where Anne and Wentworth initially meet each other on a walk in Bath – without anyone else around. However, she altered this by introducing Charles Musgrave as a third person (Taylor, 2004, 118), indicating the never-ending interruptions in love.

Triangular Desire in *Sense and Sensibility*

The most obvious, complex and potentially serious of all Austen's triangular relationships may be read in *Sense and Sensibility* – especially Chapter 22 – a scene which unravels Elinor's and Lucy's desire to marry Edward Ferrars. Lucy intuitively knows that Edward is drawn towards Elinor and that she cannot win Edward before she has won over Elinor. Her attempt to get Elinor to agree to break up with Edward (Austen, 2008, 143) is a trick in order to reveal Elinor's true feelings and thus get rid of a rival. In the scene the day after the Harley Street party (Austen, 2008, 224–230), Lucy tries to outdo Elinor by commenting on her health and making her to be vulnerable. Lucy's concern here is actually resentment born out of rivalry around Edward. This scene – one of Austen's most claustrophobic and subtle – reveals tremendous inner suffering, as well as an extreme amount of violence underlying civility.

When Lucy Steel reveals she is secretly engaged to Edward Ferrars (Austen, 2008, 124–125), she creates a triangular scene in which she needs Elinor as a rival in order to enhance her feelings for Edward and Edward's feelings for her. The waning love, which might collapse, can only be resurrected through a third person. Intimacy only stems from Lucy's jealousy towards Elinor. Lucy's claim that it is better to break off the engagement entirely cannot be taken at face value as she clearly attempts to win Edward, not by confrontation but by initially being willing to break off the engagement (Austen, 2008, 127). There is also a financial obstacle. For Lucy, Edward's 2000 pounds per year (Austen, 2008, 141) is too small a sum to sustain marriage. The people in Austen's world who either marry for money or don't marry for love of money, are somewhat betraying love. In this sense, Austen can possibly be seen a typical Romantic novelist, but the fact that money is so freely discussed in her novels also implies reasonableness, a lack of irrationally, and also a lack of *sturm und drang* underlying her worldview.

Elinor, who is seriously in love with Edward, tries to think and act rationally (Austen, 2008, 122–123), despite her growing resentment towards Lucy. However, the way she contemplates Lucy Steel's lack of education – meaning she is ignorant and illiterate – is a kind of psychological revenge, a resentment that will only hurt herself. She suspects that Lucy's defects in education, spending time in inferior society, and her frivolous pursuits may have robbed her of a character which might otherwise have given an interesting personality to her beauty (Austen, 2008, 134). This reveals the duality in Elinor's feelings; both her heroic attempt to deal rationally in love, and, on the other hand,

being able to suppress her true feelings. To read *Sense and Sensibility* as a movement towards balancing sense (lack of feeling) and sensibility (abundance of feeling), seems especially relevant in the context of the dangers surrounding triangular lovemaking where so much could go wrong and so much is decided through desire.

The final chapter, where the once so romantically smitten Marianne finds peace and solace, fits into this development of freeing oneself from triangular desire, where both sisters ultimately reach a compromise in their dealing with desire. Michael Kramp is therefore right, especially from the perspective of desire, to dismiss Austen as a secret radical – even in her own era (Kramp, 2021, 5).

In Girard's mimetic theory, the dismissal of desire being primarily drawn towards the object's inherent value indicates that desire is motivated by desire, as in the case of Elinor and Lucy. If there was a straight line from the subject to the object, it would mean that one's life would be totally rational, on the verge of being instinctual. Girard, on the other hand, claims that all our desires stem from the other.[3] Thus, his construction of desire as triangular and rivalistic seems to indicate that there is some kind of wish (desire) in Lucy to replicate something that she thinks is inherent in Elinor. If one sees Lucy as the subject and Edward as the object, Elinor becomes a passive mediator whom Lucy wishes to attain something from. She understands that Elinor is the model Edward wishes to attain and therefore becomes a much-needed model she wishes to replicate in order to make Edward Ferrars love her.

The process outlined is a process whereby desire continually fragments the self. Both Elinor and Marianne, both of whom are sincere in lovemaking, are dangerously smitten by metaphysical desire,[4] a desire where love can only thrive through competition, and where there is no development towards any real recognition of the beloved. Both their love relationships are threatened by each of them becoming a third person, full of feelings of hate, envy and jealousy. This paradoxical development makes Elinor's inner life change. Her effort to be different from Lucy means she risks becoming increasingly similar to her rival. This development has a structural similarity to the Hegelian process of acknowledgement of the other. Dag Norheim claims that in Hegel, the conflictual starting point is based on a difference which is replaced by a more fundamental likeness (Norheim, 1991, 86). The fact that those who desire try all they can to be different towards the other but end up as enemy twins reveals a most profound insight into how desire really works in erotic life. In Girard's work, desire is also presented as a movement from a stable, harmonious and differentiated starting point to a more undifferentiated, disharmonious and conflictual relationship. Thus, mimetic desire creates an asymmetrical development in which rivals propagate their uniqueness while, by the aid of desire, are led through an illusional process, diametrically opposite to what they wish.

Triangular desire, in the case of Colonel Brandon, Marianne and Willoughby, loses its intensity by Brandon backing down – or more precisely – letting time work for him. The intensity of the love between Willougby and Marianne does not seem to change Brandon, nor make him more rivalistic. Rather, his concern for Marianne comes from letting go of participating in the mimetic game. Brandon upholds civility and therefore breaks the negative spiral by heroically controlling his feelings. The excursion scene (Austen, 2008, Chapter 13, 64–70) where he must suddenly leave, turns the group into somewhat of a mob, hinting at Brandon's "immorality" in the past. Overall, the characters in this novel have a strong urge to expel anyone who questions the codes which uphold the norms of their small society – codes which uphold the norm of an unchanging hierarchy. Brandon's rational and level-headed response to the crowd thus weakens the potential resentment of the group.

Brandon is on the whole instrumental in making both Elinor and Marianne find a balance between sense and sensibility. Marianne initially sees Brandon as someone devoid of genius. *He has no taste or spirit, his understanding has no brilliance, no ardour, no voice of expression* (Austen, 2008, Chapter 10, 53). On the other hand, this lack of brilliance also makes him rather immune to mimetic rivalry.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, the mimetic cycle is rather loose, meaning that despite the many triangular constructions, there is space and emotional distance among the characters. Willoughby's and

Marianne's Romanticism is initially linear, based on Romantic ideals and feelings. However, Marianne's feelings are sincere and, as the novel progresses, it is revealed that Willoughby's feelings, although careless, were also somewhat genuine. However, Willoughby surrenders to his desire for money and is punished with an unhappy marriage to Miss Grey. Also, Lucy's unscrupulous behaviour is punished by domestic misery. Already in the beginning of the novel, Austen subtly reveals Willoughby's insincerity. His praise of Barton Cottage and its humble surroundings is merely an attempt to conceal his money-mindedness and snobbism.

The happy ending in *Sense and Sensibility* stems from both Marianne and Elinor's ability to escape the negative effects of triangular desire. Both of them choose to suffer instead of becoming victims of an ongoing rivalry. Elinor's attempt to overcome her desires by being sensible turns out, at the end of the novel, to be the right solution. By suppressing her emotions and not hastily expressing her love for Edward, Elinor creates an emotional standstill, where none of the three involved parties can act according to their feelings. On the other hand, Elinor's withdrawal and suppression of her feelings creates space and makes it possible for Lucy and Edward to continue their relationship. Edward's problem in the eyes of Lucy is that his desires are weak; he does not have the right worldly ambitions, involving wealth, fame and fashion. However, in *Sense and Sensibility,* weak desires win in the process of matchmaking. By letting Elinor, Brandon and Edward be the lucky ones in love, Austen presents an original and unromantic version of happy love. They have succeeded, not without great suffering, by being able to preserve their true feelings.

Triangular Desire in *Mansfield Park*

The novel that clearly presents the most clear-cut triangular relations is *Mansfield Park.* However, tragic fate in this novel is somewhat limited. With the exception of Mary Crawford, Edmund Bertram and Fanny Price, Austen does not really go into much depth to localise the characters inner struggle. Even if the triangular relation between Julia, Maria and Henry has a certain tragic effect on Julia – which explains why she elopes with Mr. Yeats – the reader does not really feel the social tension or the tensions in Julia as she is such a minor character and is described rather outwardly. However, Austen does not diminish the inner tension taking place in Julia, claiming that Julia, who used to be on such easy terms with her sister, "was now become her greatest enemy" (Austen, 2003, 127). Because her feeling of tragedy stems from Henry Crawford preferring Maria, it becomes, overall, increasingly clear, due to Henry's character, that it is a blessing in disguise. The rivalry between Mr. Rushworth and Henry is, on the one hand, severe as it leads to adultery and, on the other hand, inflicts serious shame on the Bertram family's social standing.

As in both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion,* the seeds of tragedy in *Mansfield Park* also start with the parents' lack of a deeper understanding of love. They are so restricted by the codes that their children's happiness in love becomes difficult to attain. In *Mansfield Park*, Lady Bertram, who was once a beauty, seems trapped in her life of luxury. The narrator claims that beauty and wealth were the only things left to excite her (Austen, 2003, 260). While *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* evoke the reader's sense of tragedy, *Mansfield Park's* – despite Fanny's near tragic destiny – social scandal is wherefrom one may understand desire.

The modern reader probably never gets to grasp the social scandal in its enormity, even if Maria must move to a foreign country (Austen, 2003, 365). The inner tension in this triangular scene is somewhat dampened by Rushworth's stupidity, and the drama becomes very much a drama about how a family may survive in society. Because Jane Austen sides with society, the romantic aspect of both Julia and Maria's elopement does not result in freedom but becomes a question of upholding societal morals.

Henry's sudden attempt to marry Fanny could be seen as triangular, partly born of jealousy towards the deep sympathy between Fanny and Edmund. But the novel gives no indication that Henry is conscious about their warm feelings towards each other. However, one thing is certain: if

Henry had known about their strong feelings, he would have done his utmost to destroy their relationship. Henry's erotic life reminds one of Don Juan in Molière's play. In this play, erotic attraction is only one aspect – actually a minor aspect – of Don Juan's love life. Rivalry towards other men is at the centre of erotic drive here. The ignition level is especially strong when he sees a woman desired by another man. Seeing one woman happily in love with another man, is, for Don Juan, as for Henry, pure torture. Henry's love life is driven by a desire to have what you cannot have. This explains both why he discards Julia, seduces Maria and falls frantically in love with Fanny, who despises him. The torture Henry suffers when seeing someone in love is not very different from Don Juan's torturous lovemaking.

The lady in question is a charming young girl, who came here in company of the man she is going to marry. I saw her by pure chance, with her fiancé, three or four days before they set out. Never have I seen two people so happily in love. Their obvious tenderness for each other went straight to my heart, and my love found its first inspiration in jealousy. It was torture to me to see them so happy together. I was consumed with envy; and I could imagine no greater pleasure than to come between them, and break an attachment so offensive to my dearest susceptibilities. (Molière. (2008). *Don Juan and Other Plays,* Oxford: Oxford UP, *40).*

As in the play *Don Juan*, love for Henry seems to grow stronger the more he gets into a rivalry with other men. Henry's destructive nature is connected to his wealth and a life which consists more or less of doing nothing, thus paving the way to delve into erotic rivalry. The fact that he considers Fanny's looks to have improved vastly in six weeks (Austen, 2003, 179) underlines the subjectivity and superficiality of his feelings. This emotional blindness makes him unable to see that Fanny really dislikes him, and he blames her lack of feeling for him on her being shy (Austen, 2003, 179).

In Austen's world, the privileged are so often unable to live a happy life, according to the advantages they have. There is always a binary opposition towards someone, either consciously or subconsciously, someone with an urge to prevent happiness from taking place. The paradox in *Mansfield Park* is that Tom Bertram, the oldest son, is completely distanced from erotic desire. And his father, Sir Thomas Bertram, fears that his eldest son will try to avoid getting married (Austen, 2003, 248). As he is both attractive and destined to great wealth, Tom should clearly be a prime model for desire. However, Austen describes Tom's desires as being prone to excessive drinking, gambling and having fun. He is therefore the antithesis to Edmund's pious nature, striving as he does to combine Eros and Agape. For Edmund, the triangular constellation between Mary, Edmund and Fanny is a trap as it weakens him in his fight against lust and superficiality. However, Hazel Jones is right in that for a while Edmund blinds himself "to her lack of moral fibre" (Jones, 2009, 148).

Contempt towards the Spiritual

Robert Ferrars jokes and is sarcastic about his younger brother Edmund Bertram taking orders and working as a priest. In *Mansfield Park*, Mary also makes fun of the priesthood because it lacks heroism, bravery and action. In other words, the priesthood does not evoke attraction or admiration among those who are too worldly and ambitious. From the narrator's perspective, Mary's scepticism towards Edward becoming a priest is a part of her superficiality. In Austen's world, the characters who are able to succeed in overcoming negative desire seem loyal towards the church – despite not failing to see the hypocrisy of some of those who profess Christian ethics. At the same time, the act of looking down on the institution of marriage as such seems to correspond to a person's vanity, snobbism and greed. This tendency to look down on spiritual matters creates a conflict in the mind of Edmund. Even if both Mary and Fanny are lacking in proper breeding, Fanny's modesty and moral honesty make her immune to the rather coarse desire directed at achieving material comfort.

Edmund, for a while, tries to make Henry a model for himself. But his admiration for Henry is actually an act of self-illusion as Henry becomes the prime obstacle for Edmund, who gradually falls in love with Fanny. Henry's sister, Mary, plays on sisterly love in order to get Fanny to marry Henry.

But her attempt to connect Fanny and Henry is actually a cunning way for her to be free to marry Edmund. However, when Edmund begins to see Mary's insincerity more clearly, he blames it all on the habits of wealth (Austen, 2003, 331), not on any individual standing in his way.

Conclusion

All Austen's novels analysed here are about preparing for marriage. But happiness in marriage depends very much on one's ethics before getting married as marriage should mean the end of metaphysical desire. Thus, marriage is the medicine that is able to stop the spreading of triangular desire. For Austen, life before marriage is a kind of rite de passage in order to find out who is worthy of happiness in marriage. Her understanding of marriage is initially similar to De Rougemont's as there is neither a critique of a negative attitude towards marriage nor a critique of the institution of marriage, as such. The decadence in society concerning the norms of marriage is not much in question. Neither is there much writing about the hypocritical life within marriage where, as in Ibsen, women are prisoners of their husband's desires. In this respect, Austen is too much an upholder of the values of her own society.

Austen's novels are mainly about rivalry in love. The fascination of the other is so strong because one wants what the other wants and thereby gets caught up in the other's desire. No amount of good breeding or upholding of high moral standards can stop rivalry going on among the characters. The only freedom in lovemaking seems to be to suffer and, in the meantime, be able to wait until circumstances change and the right moment arrives.

As in the case of Walter Elliot, Lady Russell, Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Bennet and Willoughby, there is also the question of snobbism and how it destroys normal human relationships. Snobbism is clearly the snake that ruins potentially happy partnerships. Its essence is rivalry, and its effects clearly disrupt society. The breakup of relationships, based on material inequality, is, relatively speaking, something Austen does not favour. In a way, one could perhaps say that all the major themes of her novels are about snobbery in love. On the other hand, snobbism can be seen as a way of stabilising societal competition. But snobbism creates uncertainty among the characters. Austen ends up rather nihilistic, especially in *Persuasion*, by advising the reader not to listen to the advice of others. Following the advice of others is not recommended as it is so often tinged with rivalry from the person giving advice. Surely one can see that Lady Russell's advice to Anne to break up with Captain Wentworth was not only motivated by her prejudices concerning ancestry (Austen, 2004, 15) but as an example of an all-encompassing rivalry causing people to make very bad choices in love.

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Notes

[1] The difference between romantic and realist literature is not primarily a difference according to epoch; the difference is based on an approach towards desire. There is, however, in Girard's work, a preference for novels written in the realist tradition.

[2] Girard's first attempt to understand rivalry was by locating desire as a triangular structure. Since the elaboration of triangular desire in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, this has been his most elementary model for rivalry. The triangular structure makes rivalry inevitable, as at least one of the three desiring parties will not have their desires fulfilled. The paradox, though, is that in triangular desire, absolutely all parties become losers if the process intensifies. Up to a point, sentimental love stories contain a certain truth, but these stories do not reveal how the mediator seriously changes the protagonist.

[3] See 'Metamorphosis of Desire' in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 83–95.

[4] Metaphysical desire is a desire born from the mediator hindering the subject reaching their goals. Usually, the subject is more and more influenced by the mediator, and the mediator will also gradually begin to desire the object's desire.

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