

Enikő Bollobás

Plots of Domination, Plots of Relationality  
On the Triangular Positioning of Characters in American and European Literature

Abstract

Framed by theories of patriarchy and intersubjectivity, this essay in character studies offers a paradigm for the triadic positioning of characters in American and European literature. Two types of triangles are described, patriarchal and intersubjective, set apart along the primary parameters of hierarchy, asymmetry, fixity of gendered subject/object roles, and domination vs. non-hierarchy, reciprocity, fluidity of gendered subject/object roles, and relationality. The subject–object relations of patriarchal triangles are characterized by rigidity; their positions are hierarchical, asymmetrical, and fixed in terms of gendered power as well: while men always occupy subject positions, women take object or object–mediator positions, the dominant person insists on his domination over both his rival and the desired woman. Grounded in relations with changeable positions among desiring subjects, desired objects, and mediators of desire, intersubjective triangles are characterized by non-hierarchy, shifting positions, and reciprocity or interchangeability, while the subject’s relationality is emphasized. Positions are gendered variably: men and women can equally take subject and object positions, or positions of the desiring, the desired, or the mediator. Desire can be owned by woman as much as man can be the object of desire.

Key words

character studies, triangles in literature, character triangulation, love-and-marriage plot, patriarchy, intersubjectivity; Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Michael Cunningham, Sándor Márai, Péter Nádas

Bio

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Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" is famously informed by a structure of three's, which structure, together with such narrative components as place, time, and thematic, gets articulated twice as the plot unfolds. In his by now classic study of the story Jacques Lacan understands the triangulated signifying chain not only as an allegory of the reading process but as the manifestation of the Oedipal triangle, insisting further that their compulsive doubling makes visible the mirroring process. As a result of Lacan's interpretation, as well as successive reinterpretations of the story by both Lacan and other psychoanalytic, deconstructive, and poststructuralist critics, Poe's short story, with the eternal victim—I interpret the doubling of the triangle and its various narrative constituents as turning the story into a most useful example to demonstrate the complexities of intersubjective relations. Indeed, the story offers varying modes of intersubjective dynamics from fixity to change, in particular, from three-way positions fixed by the geometrical structure to the shifts brought about by the fact that the individual angles can be occupied by various actors.

Poe's most widely known detective story provides a helpful lead into my discussion of triangle structures in literature because it encompasses features that I identify as central to three-way relationship. Not only is the narrative grounded in triangles with fixed and hierarchical positions as to the persons concealing the letter (Queen/Minister), the unobservant witnesses (King/Police), and the participants who know and either steal it (the Minister), or retrieve it (Dupin), but the seemingly fixed narrative positions get destabilized by the powerful doubling of the triangle. In other words, "The Purloined Letter" is constructed out of a set of two triangles that are each fixed and hierarchical, yet get unfixed and non-hierarchical by the doubling, corresponding in a rather intriguing way to the two triangles I discuss below.

## **I. Patriarchal love triangles**

The triangle is one of the most common patterns to structure the relations between characters in Western literature. Among the classic triangles one could mention Homer's *Odyssey* (ca. 700 BC), foregrounding the emotional dynamics between Odysseus, Penelope, and Calypso, and Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1308-1320), building on the triangulation of Dante, Virgil, and Beatrice. Among the triangles involving two men competing for one woman one should mention the Irish *Deirdre Myth* (8th-9th century), narrating the story of the young princess who is torn between the old king and the young knight; the *Arthurian Legend* (ca. 1095–ca. 1155), grounded in the triangle between King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, and Queen Guinevere, and most prominently the Tristan romance within the Arthurian legend, relating the love triangle between King Mark, Tristan, and Isolde.

In canonical English literature, the classic triangles—such as Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)—typically replay the love-and-marriage plot. Whether one man and two women or two men and one woman form such triangles of desire, it is the man who is allotted more emotional and sexual freedom, as well as agency as to choosing the woman. Compared with the British, canonical American literature has very few triangles that turn on the love-and-marriage plot, or where the two-plus-one structure

comprises one or two fixed desiring subjects and one or two fixed desired objects. The most prominent triangles of desire are all flawed in some manner, failing to conform to the classic traits. For example, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) the two relationships are not simultaneous, preventing Hester from becoming either the desired object or the desiring subject. Edith Wharton's *The Reef* (1912) can be considered one of the few nearly proper love triangles in American literature between George Darrow, Anna Leath, and Sophy Viner, the "other woman," who becomes "the reef" upon which the marriage of Anna and George can be erected. Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) develops a plot that soon turns into a travesty of the love-and-marriage plot, with Milly Theale sacrificing herself for the man she desires in order that he may marry her friend Kate Croy, the object of his desire. Although F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), positing two men who compete for the woman whom they consider the prize of success, does come close to the two subjects desiring one object model, here the thematic of the corruption of love by desire for wealth and success seems to alter the genre itself, withdrawing its love-and-marriage plot centrality. *Tender Is the Night* (1934) can be considered flawed in another way, deviating from the classic formula in the sense that here we have multiple triangles, with both Dick Diver and Nicole Diver, his wife, having extramarital affairs and replayed marriages. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) does turn on a triangle of desire of sorts, with Humbert Humbert desiring two women, but in fact he uses the mother, Charlotte Haze, as a means to get to her "nymphet" daughter Dolores (Lolita) Haze. Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Enemies—A Love Story* (1966) puts forward a triangulation of desire that is flawed in yet another sense; here Herman Broder has three women in his life (his wife Yadwiga, his mistress, Masha Tortshiner, and first wife, Tamara Broder), who now form a triangle of desired objects themselves.

The question arises, why are there so few classic triangles in American literature? In order to understand the reasons behind this obvious scarcity of fixed triangular desire plots, I would first like to touch upon two related issues: the scarcity of love-and-marriage plots in general in American literature and the patriarchal features of this particular triangle of desire. Already in his 1960 *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler discussed what he called "the failure of the American fictionist to deal with adult heterosexual love" (xi). This is a pattern, Fiedler points out, that is pervasive in American "literature of the first excellence," making it impossible for the greatest novelists to escape (xi). Joseph A. Boone further develops Fiedler's grand claim concerning, as he puts it, "the absence of women, courtship, and marriage in classic American fiction" that provide the "hallmarks of theme and form" and distinguish American literature from the English tradition (961). Boone identifies the prototypical American hero as being a lonely male outside the parameters of his culture, inhabiting "a world largely void of women or normal social regulations" (963). Insisting that this placement of the male hero outside of the domestic sphere is a "radical critique of the marital norms, sexual roles, and power imbalances characterizing 19th century American familial and social life" (961), Boone sees the male quest as involving strong male friendship that makes female presence obsolete. The term "romance," then, gains a special meaning in American literature, referring to the grand life mission of the male quester as opposed to the search for heterosexual bonding. So it seems that the scarcity of love-and-marriage plot in American literature goes hand in hand with the scarcity triangle plots of desire.

But there is another issue at play here, for it is one particular kind of triangular structure of desire that is missing in classic American literature, the one that is informed by what I called classic traits and describe as patriarchal. Such triangles conform to definitions of patriarchy given by Claude Lévi-Strauss, René Girard, Mary Jacobus, and other feminist critics and philosophers.

In his classic text on the foundations of patriarchy, Lévi-Strauss pointed out that the true aim of exogamy in primitive societies was not incest prohibition but rather the extension of kinship and the consolidation of the social institutions of patriarchy. “The prohibition is less concerned with true consanguinity [...] than with the purely social phenomenon by which two unrelated individuals are classed as ‘brothers’ or ‘sisters,’ ‘parents,’ or ‘children’” (29). The real mission of exogamous marriages was to “maintain and widen their alliances” (46): to establish, by the transfer or “exchange of women” (137), new kinship relations, and thereby alliance relations, between the male members of the tribe. As gifts exchanged in this transaction, women—even if considered “that most precious category of goods” (61)—become objectified and reified. “For the woman herself,” Lévi-Strauss concludes, “is nothing other than one of these gifts, the supreme gift among those that can only be obtained in the form of reciprocal gifts” (65).

Yet this problem is somewhat more complex. For we cannot insist that the men forming each pair are equals who participate in a relationship of two acting-speaking subjects, and who gain, moreover, power from the reified woman mediating between them. Therefore, I suggest including René Girard’s formula proposed for the relations within patriarchy as well. Modifying Lévi-Strauss’s triangle, Girard identified the structure of triangular desire in European fiction, presenting cases in which a third person is present when desire is born between two (21). Girard examines forms of desire in gendered power games, understanding desire not as sexual or erotic charge exclusively, but as additionally involving a yearning for power, possession, and domination as well. Three persons participate in the Girardian triangle, each in a different position. Of the two male subjects who own desire, one is the desiring subject, while the other the rival subject; between them there is the desired woman, who is not only the object of their desires but is “the *mediator* of desire, too (2; emphasis in original). Woman can never be subject in this triangular relationship in the sense that her “value” does not stem from her own self but from the “price” the rival man would be willing to pay for her ownership. This, Girard insists, is the most important trait of triangular desire: that desire does not stem from the subject but from the object, and is produced, moreover, through the rivalry of “two competing desires” (7).

As an instance of real-life triangles, Mary Jacobus cites the story of DNA, dubbed as the iconic “dumb blond” by the male scientists involved. DNA is the object of desire for two scientists who, as in many similar pursuits—from those recorded in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to Freud’s analysis of Wilhelm Jensen’s *Gradiva*—use the “woman” (whether DNA or the female scientist) as a mediator to act upon their homosocial desire for each other (and the Nobel Prize). Jacobus identifies the manifestation of the Girardian triangle in this situation, where the man uses the woman as a mediator connecting him to another man. As Jacobus puts it, “The ‘pretty’ object of desire [...] is pursued less for itself than for being desired by another scientist. The function of the object of desire is thus to mediate relations between men” (99). As such, relations determined by desire are basically triangular, usually

with two desiring male subjects and one desired female object. In other words, the normative patriarchal triangle is gendered and informed by power.

Feminist historians and philosophers offer useful arguments for understanding the patriarchal nature of gender relations in texts displaying rivalry for domination. Of these one should first cite Gayle Rubin's claim concerning the object status of women as "conduits" of relationships between men; women act as one of those "things" that "circulate in exchange—food, spells, rituals, words, names, ornaments, tools, and powers" (35). For this reason, Rubin identifies "the ultimate locus of women's oppression within the traffic in women, rather than within the traffic in merchandise" (37). Heidi Hartman's definition of patriarchy holds equally applicable to triangular relations. Patriarchy, she claims, can be defined as "a set of social relations [...] in which there are hierarchical relations between men and solidarity among them which enable them in turn to dominate women" (14). This interdependence as well as hierarchy among men and their subordination of women are integral to the functioning of patriarchy; moreover, the interdependence of men and the subordination of women belong to the systemic characteristics of patriarchy. Gerda Lerner's understanding of the "unwritten contracts of exchange" typical in patriarchy is similarly helpful to interpreting triangular relations. Discussing the nature of paternalism, Lerner emphasizes the "relationship of a dominant group, considered superior, to a subordinate group, considered inferior" (239). In patriarchy—defined as "the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children" (239)—women cannot escape male domination, only change, according to "the unwritten contract for exchange" (240), the dominance/protection of one man (father) for that of another (husband). And finally, the observations of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also seem applicable to patriarchal triangles. Reflecting on the triangular structure of desire, Sedgwick points out that the relationship between the two rivals is as intense as between the subject and object of desire; that is, love and rivalry may be equally fervent. The desire of the subject is only intensified by knowing that his object of desire is desired by another subject; moreover, the bond between the rivals in such erotic triangles is often stronger than the bond between either one of the desiring subjects and desired object (23). Sedgwick insists, furthermore, on the gender asymmetry of triangles, reflecting asymmetrical power relations between men and women. As such, triangular structures duly map the workings of male rivalry for dominance, as well as women's exclusion from power.

Moving on to literary texts, Henry James's "Rose-Agathe" (1878) provides one of the very few American examples of the classic patriarchal triangle as described by Lévi-Strauss, Girard, Jacobus, and the feminist theorists—albeit also flawed in some manner. In the story, Sanguinetti, the American collector falls in love with the beautiful Rose-Agathe, magnetized by the waxen bust he sees in the shop window of a Paris *salon de coiffeur*. At the same time, Sanguinetti's friend—who is the narrator of the story—falls in love with the woman who Rose-Agathe was modeled on: the wife of the *coiffeur*. Yet the two men do not actually desire the respective objects of their desire; rather, their attraction with the woman—in both its "original" and "copy" version—has the function to strengthen their friendship, the bond between the two men. In this "handbook case of fetishism," as Donatella Izzo labels the story (82), the gaze acts as "vehicle of desire" (86) in the "voyeuristic universe" of men (89) in such a way that woman in both its "original" and "copy" version is reduced to "to fetishistic object" (83) and becomes reified (90). While in one sense the story conforms to the Girardian

model, in another, it is also flawed in not fully conforming to it. For although, the two men desire the same woman, using woman as a mediator of their desire to strengthen their own ties, in fact the triangle deviates from the proper triangle in presenting the woman in two versions, turning male desire fetishistic and turning the women into real-life objects, making it hardly any different for the men whether they direct their desires onto living or lifeless objects.

Compared to the above discussed scarcity of patriarchal triangles in American literature, one Hungarian author stands out in devoting a particular attention to triangles. Indeed, fiction writer and dramatist Sándor Márai (1900–1989) pursued an almost obsessive interest in patriarchal triangles. Three of his works—of which only the last has been translated into English—stand out: written during the short period between 1935 and 1942, *Válás Budán* (Divorce in Buda, 1935), *Kaland* (Adventure, 1940), and *Embers* (*A gyertyák csonkig égnek*, 1942) all present textbook cases of the triangle structure.

A novel weighed down by dramatic elements, *Divorce in Buda* presents a painful *tête-à-tête* between two old friends, the doctor Imre Greiner and the judge Kristóf Kőmíves. The night before the divorce trial of Greiner and Anna is supposed to take place, Greiner shows up in his friend's home to tell him that Kőmíves would not preside over the trial the next day since Anna committed suicide a few hours back. She took a deadly dose of sleeping pills most probably because she had been tormented by the fact that by always loving, at heart, Kőmíves and not Greiner, she had provided the legal grounds for divorce: infidelity. What Greiner wants to know is whether Anna's hidden devotion, articulated in her dreams only, was reciprocated: did Kőmíves ever dream of her? In other words, Greiner is really interested in the other man's feelings, inadmissible desires, and sexual subconscious. Their dramatic confrontation is to test the rivalry of the two men, while the woman—left lying lifeless in her home—becomes irrelevant, as if put in parentheses in the story of her own life.

The play *Adventure* reveals an even more obvious triangle structure. Here too we have a married couple, the medical professor Péter Kádár and his wife, Anna, and another man, Kádár's subordinate in the clinic, Dr. Zoltán, who is having an affair with Anna. Kádár's life is turned upside down by news he receives one after the other: that the lovers are ready to leave him and that Anna has lung cancer, with no more than six months to live. Kádár now devises an intricate plan: not only does he let go of Anna, but works out every detail of their "adventure": he sends them to the Swiss sanatorium of his own choice, covering all their expenses, and literally orders Zoltán to follow his instructions to the last point. It is clear that the dramatic events take place between the two rival men, of which the power figure, Kádár, demands control over all others involved. All the while, the woman lies in her bedroom, sedated, terminally ill, misled. Kádár does not allow her to understand the gravity of her illness, always cutting her short when she demands to know; he similarly silences her when she wants to give him the reasons for leaving him. Denied a voice, her subjectivity is denied as well; for, as we know from Émile Benveniste, language and subjectivity are inextricably connected: it is "language alone [that] establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality; "[e]go" is he who says 'ego'" (729; emphasis in original). As such, the woman drops out of the triangle structure here too, turning it into a binary relationship of two competing men.

*Embers* is the best known piece of the three, presenting, once again, the painful exchange of two men who had once been best friends. The two men are in their seventies in

the novel's narrative present, having carried the heavy burden of the past for forty-one years, ever since Konrád conducted a passionate liaison with Krisztina, Henrik's wife. They have not seen each other since, but now Konrád initiates this final encounter, which Henrik succumbs to, knowing very well that the three of them are "as inextricably attached as crystals in the law of physics" (250). Yet Henrik, upon learning about their affair, had immediately cut out the woman from their triangular relationship, punishing her by never speaking to her again. With no other outlet to be heard, she had left a secret diary for her husband as a speaking legacy, which Konrád has never opened; now he throws it into the fire before Henrik, irrevocably silencing the woman thirty-two years after her death. Not having allowed the woman to speak, he denied her subjectivity in the sense of Benveniste again: by forbidding her to say "ego," he is forbidding her to be "ego" as well. With the woman deleted from this triangle, what we have left is, once again, the rivalry between the two men. Henrik is less concerned with the woman's emotions or her infidelity than with the friend's alleged betrayal of him. As he says, "Only one thing was incomprehensible: that you had committed a sin against me" (134). Once again, unable to interpret their love affair as anything but an attempt to defeat his competitor, the dominant male deprives his rival of even the memory of their love. And, once again, as the woman becomes silenced and excluded, the triangular structure deflates, flattened into a competition between two male rivals.

Already these short plot summaries reveal that Márai came up with versions of the classic patriarchal structure centered in male competition and rivalry. These triangles are all asymmetrical, hierarchical, with subject-object relationships that are fixed and power- and gender-based. Here the men seem to have been attached to the woman not because they had loved her for her own self but rather because she had been desired by the other man, their rival. In other words, they only view the other man as subject, taking the woman as object only, who mediates between the two male subjects. Indeed, rivalry is a constitutive element in man to man relationships in Márai's works too: Greiner, Kádár, and Henrik all strive hard to attain dominance over Kőmíves, Zoltán, and Konrád, respectively. Typically, this desire to dominate is manifest in their appropriation of language: as dominant males, they all insist on speaking, and on not letting the other speak. Moreover, they repeatedly emphasize that they have triumphed over their rivals in the competition for woman.

Márai's triangles seem indeed to conform to the patriarchal relations described by Lévi-Strauss, Girard, and Jacobus, as well as Rubin, Hartman, Lerner, and Sedgwick. Typically, the triangles are made up of positions that are fixed as well as gendered: two men acting as subjects or agents solidify their bond through a woman who mediates between them, acting as object or patient. These triangles are informed by power in the sense that the woman is exchanged—as a category of goods or merchandize to be traded—in order that the men maintain and strengthen their alliance. The two men are interdependent rivals in two senses: they strive for domination over each other, while they also compete for the woman, whose value is determined by being the object of desire of both rivals. Their triangles are asymmetrical at two levels: in terms of power asymmetry between the two men and power asymmetry between one of the men and the woman. They all use the woman to mediate between their homosocial bonds for one another. And finally, the relationship between the two rivals is indeed more intense (or significant, relevant, lasting) than that between either man and the woman.

## II. Intersubjective triangles

If American literature is typically poor in patriarchal triangles—and when they do exist, they are flawed in one respect or another—it does abound in another kind of triangular structures, those that I call intersubjective. These structures are based on non-hierarchical subject-subject relations, with unfixed, shifting, changing positions.

Theories of intersubjectivity offer several useful concepts for the definition of intersubjective triangles. The first such concept is recognition. In these triangles the Other is recognized in the sense Husserl defines the term: as the recognition of other subjectivities based on the understanding that that others experience the world differently. In *Cartesian Meditations* Husserl claims that the recognition of other subjectivities—of the existence and individual aims of others—provides the grounds for all ethical relations. “Within the bounds of positivity we say and find it obvious that, in my own experience, I experience not only myself but others — in the particular form: experiencing someone else” (148). This ethical relation—which includes both recognition and self-recognition, presence and co-presence—acts as the condition for perceiving the world from the perspective of the Other; in other words, as the condition of objectivity. For objectivity—when I realize that my perspective is one of many, therefore, I hold no privilege on truth—is fundamentally intersubjective. We can only experience the world as an intersubjective medium if we also realize that others experience it differently, or if we are capable of transgressing the particularity of our perspective. Otherwise we do not perceive the Other as subject but only as object, the object of our perception.

Interworld provides the second useful concept. The participants of intersubjective triangles occupy the interworld produced by linguistic dialogue as defined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For it is language that forms the “common ground” between the self and the Other in the “experience of dialogue”; it is language that makes up the “common world,” where “our perspectives merge into each other” (354). And although I may never be able to fully understand the Other’s perspective—“The grief and anger of another have never quite the same significance for him as they have for me. For him these situations are lived through, for me they are displayed” (356)—we can construct a common ground in which to communicate. This linguistic common ground emerges out of a pact, Merleau-Ponty insists, as the “interworld” that is the project of both participating parties (357).

The third concept is the relational self. Participants in such triangles understand the self as relational, produced by mutual engagements in the sense of the object-relations theory of Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin. Writing about “the relational construction of the self” (149), Chodorow ties the “search for meaningful subjectivity” (145) to the topic of intersubjectivity. Refuting the Freudian ideal of individuality defined by separation—an ideal tailored exclusively to male autonomy and individuality—Chodorow emphasizes the conceptualization of “the self as inexorably social and intrinsically connected” (158). While Freud’s model excludes the role of others in the construction of the self, object-relations theory “directs attention to the interrelations of individuality and collectivity or community” (152) and, as a consequence, to the role mutual engagements play in the production of the self. Benjamin also emphasizes that the traditional psychoanalytic model, valorizing



separation and differentiation, is helpful in interpreting relationships of domination only, where the separating party realizes his domination over the person he separated from. “The problem of domination begins with the denial of dependency,” she writes (“Master and Slave” 283). This concept of the subject shows a fundamental difference from that of critical feminist psychoanalytical theory, which posits a concept of individualism that balances separation and connectedness, agency and relatedness (“A Desire of One’s Own” 282). Benjamin insists that the recognition of female desire—“that one *is* a subject of desire, an agent who can will things and make them happen” (87; emphasis in original)—serves as the precondition of female subjectivity. For the intersubjective mode, Benjamin asserts, “assumes the paradox that in being with the Other, I may experience the most profound sense of self” (92). Breaking with “the logic of only one subject” (*Shadow of the Other* 42), Benjamin’s paradigm allows for symmetrical relations between two subjects. According to Benjamin’s intersubjective view, “the individual grows in and through the relationship to other subjects”; for “the Other whom the self meets is also a self, a subject in his or her own right” (*Bonds of Love* 19-20).

Intersubjective triangles seem to abound in the literatures of both Europe and the US from the late 19th century on. In Kate Chopin’s “A Respectable Woman”<sup>1</sup> (1894) Mrs. Baroda refuses to be a mediator between the desires of her husband, Gaston Baroda, and his old friend from college, Gouvernail. Although at first she seems attracted by the guest, once she recognizes the chemistry between the two men, a flame that was probably ignited while they were students, she decides to leave in a most “respectable” manner. That is, recognizing the mutual attraction between the two men, she refuses to act as object and mediator between their desires, but assumes agency by extracting herself from their budding romance.

Henry James’s “The Story in It” (1902) revises the patriarchal formula differently, reversing Lévi-Strauss’s patriarchal triangle by turning the handsome young man, Colonel Voyt, into the object of the desire of two women, Mrs. Dyott and Maud Blessingbourne. The fact that the two women do not use the man as a mediator between their desires for each other seems also to be an alteration on the Lévi-Straussian model.

Among the many British examples one might mention Virginia Woolf’s *Night and Day* (1919) with its double triangle structure involving some very modern women; Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922) with its permeable sexual triangles; D. H. Lawrence’s *The Fox* (1922) and *St. Mawr* (1925). *The Fox* offers the triangulation of two women (Banford and March) and a fox first, to be replaced by the triangle between the same two women and a young man (Henry) taking the structural position of the fox. The intimate relationship of the two women comes to be broken by the man who now falls in love with March, and after getting rid of both mediators (the fox and the other woman), he folds the three-way relationship into a two-way liaison while reestablishing heterosexual order. Desire is presented as similarly multi-directional in Lawrence’s other late novella, *St. Mawr*, depicting the American Lou Witt’s desire as it is shifting from her husband to the beautiful stallion. *St. Mawr* becomes the embodiment of a passion no actual man is endowed with; this is a passion for life that she never experience in her husband. It involves Lou and the fine horse as both subjects and

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Réka M. Cristian for drawing my attention to the peculiar character triangulation in this story, as well as in “A Rose for Emily.”

objects, one that she will pursue away from her husband and Europe, as Lou moves to New Mexico with St. Mawr.

Stefan Zweig's *Confusion* (*Verwirrung der Gefühle*, 1926) can be read as a German contribution to the modernist narrative of the intersubjective triangle. In the story of reciprocal desires between the master, his wife, and his disciple, the positions shift as Roland's love of science transforms into a passion, first for the man, later for the woman. Desire seems porous, with positions shifting, allowing all participants to experience subject and object positions alike.

Returning to American examples, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) may be cited as another example for an anti-patriarchal triangular desire, involving Brett Ashley, Jake Barnes, and Mike Campbell (as well as Brett's incidental lover Pedro Romero). While there are sexual triangles around other characters too, the novel's main focus falls on the erotic interests of Brett, who—as *femme fatale* owning desire—occupies the male position vis à vis the male objects of her desire. The novel reverses patriarchal gender positions, placing woman in the desiring subject position, while passivizing the man (Jake) by his wound received in the manly game of war. While the reversal of patriarchal gender positions show traces of patriarchy in its absence, Jake's impotence resulting in his non-sexualized/non-eroticized relationships give the final blow to any remnants of patriarchy.

We find a similarly complex and ambiguous triangulation hidden in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (1930). Several triangles are presented in the story, among them, that between Miss Emily, her father, and Homer; between Miss Emily, Homer, and the Negro servant; between the father, the Negro servant, and Homer. The three-way relationship that sticks out is the one between Emily, Homer, and the Negro servant. These three characters have a most peculiar relationship, with Emily loving Homer, Homer feeling attraction for the Negro servant (that is why, it seems, he always enters through the "back door"), and the Negro servant magnetized by Miss Emily. That is, Miss Emily, Homer, and the Negro servant alternate in taking the position of subject and object, being either the desiring or the desired one in the various relationships.

In Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1943) we have three nexus relationships, with the three main players (Miss Amelia Evans, Cousin Lymon, and Marvin Macy) taking different gender and sexual positions in each of the three combinations. The relationships are heterosexualized, as Amelia desires Lymon, Macy desires Amelia, and Lymon desires Macy. Yet the heterosexualization of their relationship does not come about through simple gender reversal. Indeed, Amelia will be the lover and Lymon the beloved; one the subject doing the pursuing, the other the object being pursued. Yet Lymon's feminization and Amelia's masculinization seem to go counter to their respective empowerment and disempowerment: it is Lymon the beloved who controls this relationship. Similarly powerless is Macy in being unable to control either his desire or Amelia. In the third relationship Macy is the feminized pursued who assumes the controlling position, while Lymon is the masculinized pursuer taking the position of the one who is controlled.

The intersubjective triangle has reached new complexities in postmodern fiction. Contemporary American author Michael Cunningham offers two illuminating examples, *A Home at the End of the World* (1990) and *The Hours* (1999), each presenting an intricate web of triangular relations bearing the marks of intersubjectivity that I introduced earlier; among

these, the fluidity of positions, relational subjectivity, and the joint creation of a linguistic interworld stand out.

A multifocal novel in which each chapter gives the first person narrative of a different character, *A Home at the End of the World* beautifully foregrounds triangular relations that inform the three time levels of the plot, relating the adolescent years of Jonathan and Bobby, their college years, and the years of their early adulthood. The story turns on several triangular relations: between Jonathan, his mother Alice, and his childhood friend Bobby; Bobby, Alice, and Jonathan's father, Ned; the new kind of family created by Jonathan, Bobby, and Clare; the nuclear family of Bobby, Clare, and Rebecca; and finally the three gay friends, Bobby, Jonathan, and Erich. All these triangular relations are offered as versions of the family, contributing to their understanding of what family means, and helping them redefine this traditional unit. As Alice puts it, these attachments serve everyone's "kitschy [...] yearning for a home" (288). In this novel, triangles are grounded in binary relationships, providing opportunities for intimacies. The most significant binary relationships are forged between Jonathan and Bobby, Bobby and Alice (Jonathan's mother), Jonathan and Clare (who live like brother and sister), Jonathan and Erich (Jonathan's lover in New York City), Bobby and Clare (who have a heterosexual romance), and Clare and her daughter Rebecca (who move out because Clare feels the bond between Bobby and Jonathan is too strong).

Cunningham presents each of the characters as produced relationally, primarily through interworlds created in three-way relationships that allow them to understand the other's perspective. Jonathan's intersubjective valences tie him to his father (whom he as a child idolized for his beauty), Bobby (with whom he initiated erotic play in their adolescent years, and who remains his lifelong love), Clare (with whom they are like brother and sister), and Erich (with whom they are lovers). Bobby asserts his subjectivity through his relations to Jonathan, Alice (with whom he established a close relationship based on shared interests like cooking), Jonathan's parents (with whom he moved in after their son leaves for college), and Clare (with whom they have a child, Rebecca). Similarly, Alice, Ned, Clare, and Erich all become who they are through their dual and triangular relations connecting them to friends, lovers, and family members. Their positions are neither gendered nor sexualized, but may vary according to the angles they occupy in these duos and triangles. Moreover, their relations are not hierarchical but are based on recognition: understanding that others experience the world differently.

*The Hours* is another novel informed by trios and triangular structures. Not only do we have the three sections with Clarissa in New York in the 1980s, Laura Brown in the 1950s, and Virginia Woolf in the 1930s (and ending her life in 1941), but have individual characters whose selves are constructed by their positions in triangular relationships. Clarissa's life is structured by a proper triangle of desire: she lives with Sally, but is emotionally attached to Richard, her once lover. Clarissa, moreover, lives in dialogue with Virginia Woolf and her fictional character, Mrs. Dalloway, inscribed by the former and identifying with the latter. Virginia Woolf's life is similarly structured by triangles in the sense that she is married to Leonard, while attached to her sister, Vanessa, and conducting an affair with Vanessa's husband, Clive Bell, as well as Vita Sackville-West. Laura Brown is the odd one out here, not living in an erotic triangle but in one with her husband, Dan, and her son Richie; in this sense, there is no third person in their marriage in terms of desire. At the same time, she does build a

rapport with a fictional character, the heroine of Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen," through which she finds herself in a textual triangle together with Susan and Doris Lessing; identifying with Susan, she herself is constructed by Lessing. These intersubjective triangles carry very complex webs of relations, with changing-shifting positions and permeable subject-subject relations.

I would like to discuss a recent Hungarian drama as my last example, *Encounter* (*Találkozás*, 1979) by Péter Nádas, a two-character, single-set drama displaying the emotional liaison of three people variously attached to one another. The events on the stage take place in the flat of Mária, a woman now in her fifties. We are in the 1960s or 70s, deep in communist Hungary slowly resuscitating from the trauma of Hungarian Stalinism of the 50s, the revolution of 1956, and post-revolutionary Kádárist terror lasting well into the 60s. Mária is a woman of aristocratic descent, a countess, persecuted in the 50s and now stigmatized and marginalized; hence her extreme poverty shown in her less than modest tiny flat. Soon her invited guest, the Young Man whose name we never learn, arrives, and they begin their slow and painful conversation. The son of her long dead lover, the Young Man visits for a heart-to-heart, prompted by the revelation of intimate details by the woman preparing for suicide. Theirs was a peculiar liaison, we learn, back in the early 50s: they had met accidentally, as their paths regularly crossed while they cut through a small square in opposite directions; had their clandestine (and always wordless) rendezvous in barren rooms resembling prison cells. In such a relationship Mária had no way of knowing that the man was a high-ranking officer in the dreaded ÁVH. Only during one of her routine interrogations, when she was taken by the police (most probably to ÁVH Headquarters, 60 Andrásy Ave) did she come face to face with this most powerful man presiding over one of her beatings. Recognizing that their rendezvous and the beatings took place in the same establishment, she comes to understand the hopeless entanglement of passion and politics in her own life too.

Confronted by the fact that he loves the same (aristocratic) woman whose beatings he had perhaps ordered, but certainly witnessed, the man is beset by a severe crisis of conscience. Emotionally crippled, he commits suicide by shooting his revolver into his mouth in front of the woman. As such, he becomes the victim of the institutional power he served, ending not only his life, but the life of the woman who loved him as well. These are, then, the events recalled during the verbal storytelling of the diegetic level; these are the multiple subtexts that weigh down the play's mimetic structure.

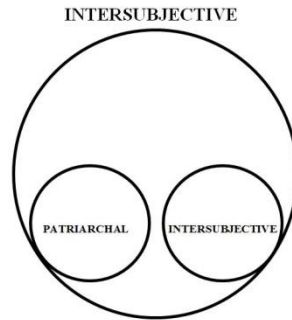
Nádas's triangle is clearly intersubjective. As opposed to the normative patriarchal scenario of Lévi-Strauss and Girard (as well as Jacobus, Rubin, Hartman, Lerner, and Sedgwick), who describe of two male subjects in a hierarchical situation, competing for the mediating woman as the prize and emblem of domination, here we have on the stage a man and a woman who both desire the encounter with an absent third. Here all three characters act as subjects (desiring), objects (desired), and mediators at the same time, who need their reciprocal relations for their ultimate life-turning encounter. Each pair in Nádas's triangle has, I want to claim, entered at some point into an ethical relationship with the other in the sense described by Husserl. Mária and the young man participate in a meaningful encounter by entering into social and linguistic dialogue. The young man responds with empathic intentionality to the woman's perceiving eyes by slowly perceiving her too. He becomes able to think and understand the Other, whether the woman or the father, finally reaching, through

this experience of perception, a cognitive experience. And out of their linguistic common ground and through their reflective attitudes they construct their Merleau-Pontyan interworld made up of revised cultural scripts. For they are both willing to suspend the attachment to the normative scripts which exclude encounters between former paramours and the sons of illicit lovers. Finally, the positions in this triangle between woman, lover/father, and son seem to shift easily, allowing not only the father to act as a medium between the woman and his son, so that the living can meet, but also the son to act as the mediator between the two lovers, one living, and the other dead. So it seems the two encounters meet as well, generating, out of a modest stage set capturing a humble flat, an echo-chamber of relational events.

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In the foregoing, I offered a paradigm for triangular character relations in American and European literature, differentiating between two types of triangles, patriarchal and intersubjective. The primary parameters along which the two types have been set apart are hierarchy, asymmetry, fixity of gendered subject/object roles, and domination vs. non-hierarchy, reciprocity, fluidity of gendered subject/object roles, and relationality. The subject-object relations of patriarchal triangles are characterized by rigidity; their positions are hierarchical, asymmetrical, and fixed in terms gendered power as well: while men always occupy subject positions, women take object or object-mediator positions, the dominant person insists on his domination over both his rival and the desired woman. Grounded in relations with changeable positions among desiring subjects, desired objects, and mediators of desire, intersubjective triangles are characterized by non-hierarchy, shifting positions, and reciprocity or interchangeability, while the subject's relationality is emphasized. Positions are gendered variably: men and women can equally take subject and object positions, or positions of the desiring, the desired, or the mediator. Desire can be owned by woman as much as man can be the object of desire.

I do not wish to claim that the two types of triangular structures, patriarchal and intersubjective, are mutually exclusive; rather, I posit the two as meaningful formations identifiable among the structural elements of triangular relations. To capture the nature of this relationship, I adopt the succinct observation regarding Freud's *heimlich-unheimlich* relationship given by Pál Hegyi, who points out that the peculiarity of this relationship lies in the fact that, obeying the compulsion to repeat infinitely, the *unheimlich* contains its own opposite, the *heimlich* (279). By the same token, intersubjective triangles can be said to contain, in an uncanny manner, their own opposite, the patriarchal—as if in obeisance of some impulse to infinitely repeat one normative schema within a supposedly dichotomous other. Following Hegyi's diagram (279), then, this is how I visualize the interconnectedness of patriarchal and intersubjective triangles:



Finally, I believe that, given the fact that patriarchal triangles are made up of binary relations with fixed positions between rivals who compete for domination and who basically strive to exclude women (or at least make them irrelevant), these only look like triangles but do not function as such. Only intersubjective triangles are truly triangular, those based in subject-subject relations, since here the selves mutually engage with each other, experiencing other subjects from fluid and changeable positions. And this can happen even if the intersubjective structure contains, in a most *unheimlich* manner, patriarchal relations.

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