# HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN NOVELS: MIMETIC RIVALRY?

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**Abstract** - The purpose of this paper is to look at novels based on relationships and see if we can apply to them the interpretation proposed by René Girard, who claims that all desire we experienced is based on the fact that we desire something because we enter into competition with someone else that desires the same thing or already has it. We also hate a person because we wish we were that person and have what he or she has. Examples will be aleatory from literary works.

**Keywords** - Conflict, Imitation, Psychology, Unconscious.

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to René Girard, what we desire is, unconsciously, because someone else has it (Girard 1977: 146). According to him, the prince wanted to save the princess from the dragon in fairy-tales as he desired her since the dragon had her. There are parodies related to this, internet memes, with the dragon saying that everything was going on fine, he was living peacefully with the princess, until the prince appeared and ruined everything. If we desire what someone else has, then everything moves towards conflict.

**Human behaviour is based on imitation:**
"Beginning with his first book Deceit, desire and the Novel René Girard develops specific theory of desire, based on the ancient category of mimesis. The term mimesis in Girard's view means the basic imitative predisposition. It designates primary, unconscious, intrinsic and vital dynamism which forces human behavior and his way of thinking. Human beings through the imitation develop language, the ability to learn and gain knowledge. Primary mimetism is also an indispensable element of socialization and enculturation. This idea is well known from Aristotle, who wrote: 'Man differs from other animals in his great aptitude for imitation'." (Straczek 2014: 47)

Everything that human beings learn is done through imitation, according to Girard. Imitating, in this sense, is equivalent with learning the ways of the world. However, imitation leads to conflicts in relationships, since we get into competition with another person that we admire and we desire to have what that person has. Also, imitation can mean a way of adapting and conforming to the rules of society and of the group we are trying to integrate into. Girard believes that imitation is at the core of the human process of learning: "there is nothing, or next to nothing, in human behavior that is not learned, and all learning is based on imitation. If human beings suddenly ceased imitating, all forms of culture would vanish. Neurologists reminded us frequently that brain is an enormous imitating machine. To develop a science of man it is necessary to compare human imitation with animal mimicry, and to specify properly human modalities of mimetic behavior." (Girard 1987: 7)

Through imitation we adapt to the culture we belong to. Any culture has a system of values, and heroes and personalities that are symbolic of these values. Once we learn through imitation, we wish to do away with any obstacle, as a model we have looked up to can become one at some point.
According to Baciu (2013: 13), the learning of one's own culture is done, as suggested, through imitation:

"Any individual's culture is acquired on his/her way towards adulthood, through communication (speech, gestures, images, education) and through exposure to the facts and ways of life provided by the home cultural context."

The fact that we take models as objects of imitation, but afterwards we enter in conflict with them since we want what they have goes back to Girard's reinterpretation of Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. According to Girard, the boy takes the father as a model, and imitates him. In the imitation process he also imitates the father's desire for the mother, which leads to their rivalry. This explains the ambivalent relationship of admiration and rivalry between father and son at the Oedipal stage. (Straczek 2014: 50).
The conflict that arises from desiring the same object is solved through scapegoating, according to Girard. This is a reaction of the community against violence. The scapegoat, or the victim, is chosen, unconsciously, so as violence is directed against one person, and the community becomes united by fighting against the scapegoat. (Straczek 2014: 51) An example of scapegoat is a king that is crowned. First, he is a model and symbol of power, afterwards

mimetic rivalry arises, and in the future he may become a scapegoat. In order to escape from this future, kings need to build their power before mimetic rivalry appears and afterwards they need to redirect the violence of the community against another scapegoat. Religion tries to keep and to bring peace by directing the community's attention to a scapegoat: an unpleasant event or tragedy can be explained to occur due to divine will, and the conflict can look as having been solved.

Girard's theory seems to provide a template to apply in order to understand the way communities and cultures function.

The paper will examine, taking as an example the behaviour of characters in fiction, the way Girard's theory can be applied to explain the aspect of imitating and its consequences in human relationships.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Previous research will be examined in this section on novels where we can find illustrations of Girard's concept of mimetic desire. Love relationships are depicted as rivalry relationships, as it appears that strong feelings appear due to the existence of a rival. The results are, most often, tragic, especially in Thomas Hardy's Victorian fiction.

### A. Thomas Hardy's Novels: Love as Rivalry

Massey (2000: 118) discusses the triangles in The Return of the Native by Thomas Hardy from a Girardian perspective of mimetic desire. The three triangles all involve the character Wildeve: Clym Yeobright – Eustacia Vye – Damon Wildeve, Eustacia – Wildeve – Thomasin Yeobright, and Wildeve – Thomasin – Diggory Venn. Thus, all relationships contain a subject, an object, and a mediator (Girard 1977: 145). Massey (2000:121) notices how Wildeve, although not a person to easily commit, just like Eustacia, has his interest in Eustacia revived once she is another man's, Clym's: "the old longing for Eustacia had reappeared in his soul: and it was mainly because he had discovered that It was another man's intention to possess her. To be yearning for the difficult, to be weary of that offered; to care for the remote, to dislike the near; it was Wildeve's nature always." (Hardy 1969: 170). Girard (1977: 145) explains this desire in the case of Wildeve as follows: "the subject desires the object because the rival desires it". Indeed, Massey (2000: 121) identifies Hardy's description of this process in the psychology of Wildeve:

"As for Wildeve, his feelings were easy to guess. Obstacles were a ripening sun to his love, and he was at that moment in a delirium of exquisite misery. To clasp as his for five minutes what was another man's through all the rest of the year was a kind of a thing he of all men could appreciate." (Hardy 1969: 205).

Thomas Hardy thus describes the psychology of the characters in such a way that he accurately fits into the theory of mimetic desire the characters' behaviour. The situation fits like a template to other love triangles in literary works, as well as in real life. Through reading Hardy's novel, we get a better grasp of behaviour and theory. Through reading fiction, we develop our feelings of sympathy with characters (Johnson 12, Bal & Veltkamp 2013) and, by extension, real life persons we interact with.

In Tess of the d'Urbervilles, there is a similar triangle, Tess – Alec – Angel. It is "a novel that appears to focus on the eponymous and tragic heroine, [but] is also structured by rivalry between two men who desire her, Angel Clare and Alec D'Urberville" (Bennett and Royle 2014: 214-215). The same dynamics are at work here: Alec seduces Tess, abandons her, Angel falls in love with her, then Alec desires her again. The results are tragic, since Tess confesses to Angel the fact that she belonged to another man before, which is an issue in evolutionary psychology, as Angel is unsure about whether he is the father of the baby or not, at an unconscious level.

In the novel The Mayor of Casterbridge, the same structure of desiring the same thing with someone else appears, in the triangular relationships Henson – Susan – child, Newson – Susan – child. Rodden (2011: 1) reads these triangles as oedipal in a Freudian sense, as mimetic desire according to Girard's theory and as destructive and relationships with tragic ends.

In Thomas Hardy's novels, the end is often tragic, and makes us recall Greek tragedies.

### B. Jane Austen's Novels: Love Triangles

In Jane Austen's novel Persuasion, we find the triangle Louisa – Wentworth – Anne, where we notice that "Louisa is aware of Wentworth's increased interest in Anne, and that her leap is an effort to fortify her hold on Wentworth and beat out her new rival by overplaying the new romantic persona." (Taylor 2005: 105)

Jane Austen's novels serve to prove, through the dynamic of relationships and triangles, the fact that the characters finally conform to the rules of society. They prove that they are skillful and witty in the art of conversation, of charming the other, of being able to play an intellectual type of game when it comes to conversation skills. The conflicts are not tragic in Hardy's way, but in a way that makes characters have

internal and psychological dilemmas. Austen focuses more on the realm of emotions, on the way the characters are affected by society's gossip about them.

According to Girard, love relationships always involve a triangle: "the passion that possesses the great heroes and heroines – Madame de Clèves, Julien Sorel, Emma Bovary – is not the spontaneous impulse of one soul toward its double, but a mediated social response that fixes its object at the dictates of a third." (Marie 1985: 1). At the same time, other couples in European literature also have an opposition in terms of social conventions, such as Sue and Jude in Hardy's novel Jude the Obscure, who are cousins and the norms of the times do not allow for their union by true love (Marie 1985: 1). Conflict thus arises not only through relationships among persons, or characters, but also among characters and social norms.

Love triangles are thus, inevitable, in terms of Girard's theory, as it is is only through rivalry that love feelings are, apparently, intensified and kept alive, rivalry with other persons or with social norms.

**C. Best Friends by Linda Trent: Desiring What the Other Best Friend Has**

This novel is a very good illustration of Girard's mimetic desire. Two best friends, Chelsea and Karen, end up desiring the same man, Ryan. They are all friends in college, but Ryan falls for Chelsea, then Karen desires Ryan as Chelsea seemed to have him. The issue of desire is more complicated, as Karen wishes she were in Chelsea's shoes. We see how she admires Chelsea when it comes to her academic realizations and to her way with relating to Ryan. She admires Chelsea, she takes Chelsea as a role model, as she is constrained by her family to go to college more in order to find a suitor rather than for her academic achievements, and ends up competing with Chelsea for Ryan. At some point, Karen tells Ryan she had wanted him because Chelsea wanted him and she did not want Chelsea end up with having him. The triangle is, though, more complex. Chelsea is an independent person who ends up pregnant with Ryan's child in college after a passionate but brief love affair. She does not tell him that she is pregnant with her child, and has an abortion, and only Karen knows about this. Chelsea wants to choose pursuing her lifestyle and carreer as a painter instead of getting married. Later on, as Karen and Ryan marry and have children, Chelsea will wish for what they have together. Karen marries Ryan, as Ryan believes that he would like to have the girl that stays with him and is not too independent, like Chelsea, and that could leave anytime. Then Chelsea wishes she were Karen and regrets not marrying Ryan and having his baby, as Karen will have in the end. Everyone thinks it is unusual for the three of them to still keep their relationships of friendship as they should be on conflicting terms. In the end, Ryan chooses Chelsea and their friendship breaks.

## III. RESULTS

The few examples chosen show that desire is not autonomous, that we may not desire something because we wish so, but because others desire it and we feel this desire more since we are in competition with someone else. As members of a certain society, we are told what is expected of us. Freud believed we are conditioned by unconscious drives, and Girard seems to continue along the same lines. Society teaches us its values, and we grow to respect them. In the process, we take as examples what other members do, and we start wishing what they have, and end up desiring the same thing and thus we come into conflict with them. The best example is that of the two best friends in Lynda Trent's novel, where the two girls end up competing for the same man, even though at times they seem to have given up any conflictual intent.

All along the two friends wish they were like the other one: Chelsea becomes a model for Karen, for what she would like to become, and Karen for Chelsea, through what she manages to become. Chelsea is very independent and well off professionally, she has a very promising future and knows how to act in personal and love relationships. In the meantime, Karen exemplifies a stable lifestyle, with marriage and children. However, each of them seems to want what the other one has. In the loves of each one, there is something missing. None of the two friends, Karen, nor Chelsea have everything they truly want and they constantly want what the other one has. Ryan falls somehow in the middle: in-between a career and a family life, they wish to fit in a successful and fulfilling relationship with Ryan. Ryan is in-between the two, as, on the one hand, he wishes for stability in his relationship, and on the other, for a relationship that is full of passion.

Thomas Hardy makes us aware of the tragic dimension of desiring the same love object in his works. Jane Austen shows us how the need to conform to society makes us form love triangles, but in her works things are resolved peacefully, not as violently as in Hardy's novels, yet at the cost of inner turmoil and dilemmas. Finally, though, the characters will make a good choice, so that the order in society is maintained. In Jane Austen's novels, mimetic relationships are a way of showing one has learned the proper ways of society.

They desire the same objects as that is the proper way to evolve in society. All relationships in that society are formed on the same pattern, yet they do not end up in a strong, tragic conflict as in Hardy's novels. The authors' approach also count for the result of the mimetic rivalries. In Lynda Trent's novel, the characters follow a path that is similar to that in Austen's novels, not as violent as in Hardy's fiction.

## IV. DISCUSSION

"What drives human behaviour?" and "What motivates characters in their way of action?" are questions that many readers ask when reading a novel. It is also a philosophical dilemma, regarding what we strive for in our existence, and what is the purpose of our lives. Girard tries to understand the way human relationships work. Perhaps it is not the only possibility and the only path that human relationships in a novel can take. For instance, in the novels by Virginia Woolf, the focus is no longer on the relationships between characters, or at least this is what the author tries to achieve. In novels such as Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe, the focus is on survival. In novels such as Bel-Ami by Guy de Maupassant, the character's focus is on achieving richness and social status, yet getting all this is also the result of imitation, of what others wish to have. Achieving social status and riches is a universal wish of any member of any society. Whether this wish is individual or copied from others remains a philosophical question. However, since we live in a society, we are forced to conform to its ways of life and to adapt to them in order to survive, or, at least, to leave comfortably and respectably. However, the fact that the main character in Bel-Ami seduces Madeleine in order to get revenge on her husband can lead us to think that it was all due to Girard's theory of mimetic desire. We could also believe that the reason why authors create conflictual relationships is because they wish to keep their readers interested in the plot. What better way than to present them with relationships of triangles, and of characters wishing for the same thing and getting in competition?

Strongly tied to the topic of mimetic rivalry and desire for the same thing can be the unsolved philosophical question of what makes us happy. Are we ever happy? Do we only experience moments of happiness, as we always wish for something else, for something more or can we achieve a stable relationship with happiness?

## V. CONCLUSIONS

We could apply Girard's theory of mimetic rivalry and apply a script or template to fictional works as composed of conflictual relationships over the same desired object, or of love triangles. This could also also be an extended pattern applied to real-life relationships, yet what motivates the rivalries should not always be reduced just to the reason of the idea that it is in the nature of humans to desire what someone else has, and of wishing to become like someone then becoming their rival. What drives humans in their lives and what motivates their actions remains complex. Achieving social status may be a way to conform to social standards, as we have learned that we need to contribute to our culture and bring about our own contribution. We take heroes as models, yet they can afterwards stand in our way, as we wish to become better than them or to bring innovations in various fields of science, and by definition this means going into a relationship of rivalry with other discoveries and scientists. We could say that taking up a personality as a role model and the wishing to become better than him serves as motivation and brings about progress for a collectivity, as it is for the collective progress of the respective culture. At the same time, with Modernism and Postmodernism role models and values start to be questioned, and the relationship of rivalry is manifested by ridiculing the respective personality and wondering whether it is worth taking such values as absolute and universal when instead we could just enjoy life.

The success recipe for plots in fictional works, for bestsellers, stand on universal human wishes, and so are those wishes described by Girard's mimetic desire theory. What troubles readers unconsciously is what they wish for unconsciously and that is a way of ensuring popularity of the respective work. This mechanism ensures the popularity through the ages of the Oedipus myth, which is kept from ancient times, to Shakespeare's plays (such as Hamlet) and to novels in the contemporary age (Ever After by Graham Swift, where the main character identifies with Hamlet, in a parodic key, though, at times).

Novels are part of the consumerism phenomenon, which has been explained by Girard in terms of mimetic desire. We wish for something as we see someone else in a commercial having it and using it. We read the same novels because others do so, be they close friends or celebrities. We buy and enjoy the same bestseller novels as we want to read what others read.

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