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Triangles and Entrapment: *Julia O'Faolain's* No Country for Young Men

by THOMAS R. MOORE

AN EXPLORATION of the triangular relationships among the characters in Julia O'Faolain's 1980 novel *No Country for Young Men* reveals a paradigm of control and entrapment of women throughout Irish history. O'Faolain, who has published several other novels and short stories, also co-edited with her husband in 1973 a collection of readings concerned with the historical position of women, *Not in God's Image: Women in History from the Greeks to the Victorians*. In *No Country for Young Men* she details "how devastating to a society the mistreatment of women, the misuse of their energies and gifts, really is" (Moynahan 7). Political intrigue, Irish nationalism, social commentary, clever mystery, and abundant literary and mythological allusions flesh out the narrative, but O'Faolain's primary focus is the women.

The novel comprises two interwoven plots, one in 1922, the second fifty years later. The first concerns Irish-American Sparky Driscoll, murdered by young Judith Clancy to protect American funding for the IRA; the second deals with Grainne O'Malley, Judith's grand-niece, and her affair with James, a Californian visiting Ireland to tape political reminiscences for a film. The two time periods interweave throughout the novel, intersecting at the climax as Judith witnesses James's murder. An overlayment of French critic René Girard's theory of "triangular desire" brings into focus the forces at play in the triangular relationships in the novel.

In the opening essay of his critical study, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, Girard sets forth the energies at work on fictional characters and the objects—or persons—they desire. Since Don Quixote (one of his primary illustrations) pursues the perfect chivalric existence represented by Amadis of Gaul, "he has surrendered to Amadis the individual's fundamental prerogative: he no longer chooses the objects of his own desire—Amadis must choose for him" (1). This model of chivalry which Don Quixote aspires to is what Girard terms "the mediator of desire. Chivalric existence is the imitation of Amadis in the same sense that Christianity is the imitation of Christ" (2). In Girard's schema Don Quixote and Amadis are connected by a horizontal line indicating Don Quixote's (the subject's) desire to attain Amadis' (the object's) perfect chivalric nature. But above this horizontal line "radiating toward both the subject and the object" (2) is the mediator, the model of chivalric existence.

Girard sets out this three-part system as a triangle, cautioning that “the triangle has no reality whatever; it is a systematic metaphor” (2).

Flaubert’s Emma Bovary is Girard’s other primary illustration. Emma pursues a conception of a romantic heroine which, as Girard says, has been created by “the second-rate books which she devoured in her youth [which] have destroyed all her spontaneity” (5). She is similar to “the *vaniteux*—vain person—[who] cannot draw his desires from his own resources” (6):

A *vaniteux* will desire any object so long as he is convinced that it is already desired by another person whom he admires. The mediator here is a *rival*, brought into existence as a rival by vanity, and that same vanity demands his defeat. (7)

The intensity of the subject’s desire for the object is governed by “the imaginary desire which he attributes to his rival” (6). Girard’s theory of mimetic desire does not require that the mediator be a rival, but, as in the cases of Don Quixote and Emma Bovary, simply a desired end. If the subject and mediator are rivals for the object, Girard terms this “internal mediation” (9). Conversely, external mediation is “when the distance is sufficient to eliminate any contact between the two spheres of *possibilities* of which the mediator and the subject occupy the respective centers” (9).

The three points of Girard’s “‘triangular’ desire” metaphor are always subject, object, and mediator. Spontaneity, another key term in his system, is the opposite of vanity. A spontaneous character is unfettered by an outside desire—he has retained his individuality and his freedom to choose (Don Quixote and Emma Bovary have relinquished both) and would be excluded from Girard’s system.

O’Faolain immediately suggests her focus on triangular relationships in choosing to name her central character Grainne. Daughter of Cormac, King of Ireland, Grainne was the “object” of the rivalry between Diarmuid and Finn. In *Grania*, Lady Gregory’s play based on the myth, Finn in his old age desires the youthful Grania, and Diarmuid and Grania must flee to escape him. Diarmuid, however, faithful to Finn, swears “It is not as wife I will bring her” (Gregory 190) and that he will “show respect to her till such time as [Finn’s] anger will have cooled” (190). Diarmuid in his perfect youthfulness possesses what Finn desires, and Finn in his pursuit of Grania has forfeited his freedom to choose, a pattern of internal mediation according to Girard’s model: Finn the subject, Diarmuid the mediator and rival, Grania the object. In 1880 Lady Gregory married Sir William Gregory, thirty years her senior. Critic Mary Fitzgerald points out that the Grainne myth “had such strong autobiographical significance for its author that she did not allow its production during her lifetime” (Fitzgerald 17) and that the play “contains some of her most lyric speeches and an intimate understanding of the complexities of love between the young and old” (18).

In Act II of *Grania*, seven years after the couple has fled, Grania says to Diarmuid: “It was not love that brought you to wed me in the end” but “jealousy, jealousy of the King of Foreign, that wild dark man, that broke the hedge between us and levelled the wall” (Gregory 193). Girard points out that “Jealousy and envy imply a third presence: object, subject, and a third person toward whom the

jealousy or envy is directed. These two 'vices' are therefore triangular" (12). Girard explores this further, noting that "like all victims of internal mediation, the jealous person easily convinces himself that his desire is spontaneous" (12), whereas in reality "true jealousy is infinitely more profound and complex; it always contains an element of fascination with the insolent rival" (12). We see a direct illustration of this dynamic of triangular forces when Grania explains to Diarmuid, following the fight with the King of Foreign by the pool, that "it was not till you saw another man craving my love, that the like love was born in yourself" (196). In the same speech Grania goes on to explain to Diarmuid that if they return home their love "will be kept kindled for ever" (196) by his hearing kings' sons saying " 'It is no wonder Diarmuid to have gone through his crosses for such a wife!' " (196) and by her overhearing "their sweethearts saying: 'I would give the riches of the world, Diarmuid to be my own comrade' " (196). We sense Lady Gregory's acute insight into all four of these triangular situations (ordered here as subject/object/mediator): Finn/Grania/Diarmuid, Diarmuid/Grania/the King of Foreign, Diarmuid/Grania/jealous admirers, and Grania/Diarmuid/jealous admirers.

In *No Country for Young Men* we see Grania's namesake, Grainne O'Malley, in three relationships, each time occupying a different position in Girard's metaphorical triangle. First, in the Grainne/Thea/Michael triangle which is played out in Rome, Grainne assumes the role of the mediator (and eventually rival), with Thea as subject and Michael as object. Thea wants Michael so she can "marry up" (O'Faolain 247) the way several of her friends have, but Michael hesitates, knowing his father will disinherit him if he marries below himself socially. Michael says, "He'd cut me off. We've got to move warily" (250). When Thea turns to Grainne for advice, it becomes clear to Thea that, cousin of Michael's or not, Grainne has become a rival. Thea, the "brassy, disillusioned shopgirl" (247), can never, even with her "readiness to adapt" (246), become acceptable to Michael's family. Grainne becomes both rival and mediator as "the trio" (248) dines out "almost nightly" (248), and Grainne senses she may "be being backed into the role of predatory little deb who swipes the heroine's man" (248). Thea wishes to imitate Grainne, the model of the socially acceptable and thus marriageable woman, in the way Emma Bovary wishes to imitate her model of the romantic heroine engendered by her reading of those "second-rate books" (Girard 5).

Although Grainne becomes the rival of Thea for Michael, Thea and Grainne could not exchange their respective positions of subject and mediator. Not only does Thea not represent Grainne's desired image, but even in their courtship there is little sexual energy between Michael and Grainne; Michael substitutes drink for sex. Later Grainne recalls that "sex had been of such minimal importance in her marriage" (249) and is stunned to learn, when Thea and her Columbian lover visit Dublin, that with Thea "Michael, in that department, was memorable" (249). Something is amiss with Michael in his near incestuous marriage, in his inept fathering of Cormac, and in his sexuality as well: it was the episode of his "buggering a sheep" (278) on the monastery farm when he was a

schoolboy that had persuaded his father to send him “to Rome to have his voice trained for the Grand Opera” (278).

In the second triangular situation, Grainne’s pursuit of James, she becomes the subject, James the object, and the mediator her vision of the “free” woman (at first represented by her friend, Jane, Director of the Halfway House for Battered Wives in London) whom she wants to imitate in the same way Don Quixote attempted to imitate Amadis of Gaul. She had run off to London to be free: “Grainne was certainly not the cart-horse breed. Bad at pulling burdens, she’d slipped her harness five months back and left for London with their son, Cormac, leaving Michael to dry out alone” (47). She had freed herself of Catholicism (98) and had entered willfully into an affair with her cousin Owen Roe (145), one of O’Faolain’s vain, brutal males like Fintan McCann from her early short story, “Turkish Delight,” who “collects scalps” and “doesn’t even *like* the women he takes to bed!” (77). At the rendezvous at the cottage James tells Grainne: “So you propose a double bind. Like your namesake did to that poor guy she forced to run off with her. In the Celtic saga. What’s his name?” (166).

O’Faolain reminds us of the myth of Grainne and Diarmuid at this moment of incipient lovemaking because it is just such a “bind” of love and commitment that Grainne is bent upon avoiding: she wants James (the Girardian “object”) only insofar as he represents freedom and temporary sensuality. Her mediator is that free woman, not sexual interdependence. Feminist critic Ann Weekes points out in a discussion of the novel that Grainne’s fury at Owen Roe’s advances is her “first real step towards freedom” (Weekes 98) and that she continues “to resist the pattern which the powerful males will impose” and “to resist the physical comfort these males may grant” (98) by continuing to see James. It is clear, as Weekes also mentions, that “traditional roles are reversed in James and Grainne’s relationship” (98). It is Grainne whose fingers are “rough” (O’Faolain 198) “like sandpaper” (198) and James whose flesh is “fluidly perfect” (198), unlike the situations Grainne is used to where “*she* is the desirable one to whom *they* were beholden” (198).

The third positioning of Grainne in the metaphor of triangular desire is as object, desired by James. A mediator similar to Grainne’s ideal of freedom is at work here since James is also fleeing a static marriage, “a box” he calls it, which he would need “a powerful spring” (169) to escape from. O’Faolain’s epistolary portrait of James is clearly derisive in its focus upon his self-absorption and his hypocritical concern for his wife. Therese, “the older woman” (16) who “had got him to bed, to the registry office and through his Ph.D.” (16), fears it is her “lumpy thighs” (14) that have driven James off. James is being, in his own words, “a selfish and insensitive bastard” (234), and the letters strike at Therese’s fears of her waning sexual attractiveness with the animal imagery he uses to describe the affair with Grainne: “I am like a dog barking at a door behind which he smells a bitch on heat: glaze-eyed, hot-tongued, maddened” (216). Later Grainne is “like some piece of animal bait with which Ireland trapped me” (233). We have silence from Therese. O’Faolain includes only one letter from her (169) before James’s letters begin with the news of his affair with Grainne.

By observing Grainne in the three corners of Girard's triangle, her cage and her struggle to free herself come into clearer focus. She moves from corner to corner—from mediator to subject to object—but spontaneity eludes her. She sees beyond; she cannot get beyond. And in another triangular relationship in the novel a curious interplay of forces emerges.

In 1922 both Judith and Kathleen (Judith's sister) respond sexually to Sparky Driscoll, Kathleen willingly, Judith reluctantly. Kathleen falls in love with Sparky: "I'm in love for the first time" (332) (thereby setting up yet another triangle of Kathleen/Owen/Sparky), and Judith is overcome when Sparky kisses her: "Her body was behaving wildly. Were they both mad?" (260). And it is Judith as temptress and self-sacrificial savior, acting spontaneously and outside of Girardian triangular forces, who murders Sparky to keep him from going back to cut off American funds for the IRA. Judith retains her spontaneity, "saves" Ireland, but sacrifices herself in the process—another long-suffering Irish heroine, like O'Casey's Juno Boyle or Synge's Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*. Ann Weekes sees Judith's decision here and other such self-defeating acts as a "madness" which is "associated with the political confusion that has affected Ireland for over sixty years" (101). And it is Sparky, ironically, who reminds Judith that her namesake "is the sacrificial Judith of the Bible" (258).

In the story from the Apocrypha the biblical Judith, beautiful and "dressed in her gayest clothes" (Judith 10:3), tricks the Assyrian enemy, King Holofernes, into believing he may seduce her. While he sleeps in his tent, she murders him:

She went to the bed-rail beside Holofernes' head and took down his sword, and stepping close to the bed she grasped his hair. "Now give me strength, O Lord, God of Israel," she said; then she struck at his neck twice with all her might, and cut off his head. (13:6–8)

Likewise, Judith Clancy leads Sparky to believe he may seduce her. Alone with Judith in the Devereux mansion during the storm, Sparky touches her, his fingers playing "on the base of her neck, curling and uncurling her short, escaping hair" (339). Then Judith, temptress and savior like her namesake, takes the bayonet Sparky had removed from the wall and drives "the blade up under his rib cage, through the pit of his stomach and into the woodwork on the back of the divan" (342). The executions fuse in both method and motive here, the Israelite Judith believing "The Lord will deliver Israel by my hand" (8:33), Judith Clancy believing she will deliver Ireland by keeping Sparky from "going back to America to cut off their only source of arms" (340–41).

In the Kathleen/Owen/Sparky triangle Judith is afraid that Kathleen and Sparky's attraction for each other will provoke a fight between Owen and Sparky. Easily jealous, Owen believes Kathleen was dancing with Sparky in their clandestine visit to the Devereux Estate (121). However it is difficult to separate love from politics here, to set out cleanly the operative forces in this triangle. Judith herself says in answer to Grainne's question about the bad feelings between Owen and Sparky: "Politics? Oh, I suppose it came into it. What didn't it come into in those days? But no, I can't remember exactly" (121). Judith's bog-like memory tenaciously keeps its secrets, "its unfathomable

layers” revealing only occasional “phosphorescent glowings” (12). And Sparky’s death defuses the triangle.

Memory, a controlling motif throughout the novel, becomes mediator in a triangular relationship of Judith as subject and “empowerment” as object. If Judith can integrate her memory of 1921 with her present, she will reassemble her divided world. As the novel advances, Judith’s memory, “shocked” into disarray, becomes progressively more lucid. Early in the narrative, “memory” is obscure, is polluted. As Michael walks Judith home from the convent they pause at the canal (where Judith will later see James murdered), and Judith comments that it “Looks dirty” (46). Michael replies that it is “Polluted . . . like memory’s stream” (46). Mary, the present maid, becomes Bridie (55) of 1921, further signaling Judith’s two worlds. Her will to fuse these two worlds, to reassemble events, is clear when she tells Grainne “I’m seeking a memory” (92) as she jabs at the cushion (Sparky) with Cormac’s hockey stick (the bayonet). But at the end Judith wrongly believes that “she [is] in command of her faculties” (364) as she relates James’s murder to the unbelieving Owen Roe. Too terrifying for her to bring to her consciousness, the horror of Sparky’s murder remains a dream, “dirty in her mind . . . like a stain . . . in the long Irish twilight” (365). Her quest for memory, for empowerment, is as futile as Don Quixote’s quest for chivalric perfection.

No Country for Young Men portrays what has become an expectation in Irish literature: women capable of sacrifice and men disabled by drink or jingoism. Eamonn, Judith’s brother, is killed in the fighting in 1919 (81); Owen O’Malley, “who doesn’t really like women at all” (299), is devoured by his patriotism; Michael is a drunk, incapacitated as husband, father, or provider; Owen Roe brutalizes women and manipulates Cormac for political ends; drunken, smelly Patsy Flynn, “invigorated” (360) by death and caught once putting “bombs in post boxes” (361), is an assassin; and even James is ineffectual, lost, wavering between his wife and his mistress. It is the women who act: Judith bayonets Sparky; Grainne tries to leave, first her marriage, then Ireland. Yet both women are undone by the men and their politics.

Another Irish heroine, Deirdre, “object” in a triangular affair, makes the hard decision to return to Ireland after fleeing with her lover, Naisi. In Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows* she says: “It’s seven years we’ve had a life was joy only, and this day we’re going west, this day we’re facing death, maybe, and death should be a poor, untidy thing, though it’s a queen that dies” (Synge 248). Like Grania in the myth, Deirdre has married against the wishes of the King, and like Grania she must return home to face him. The mythical Grania is, as Ann Weekes puts it, “condemned for the disorder that followed Fionn’s pursuit of his desire” just as “women have been condemned throughout Irish history” (92). Few of O’Faolain’s characters, male or female, operate outside of Girard’s triangle of forces; few have retained their “spontaneity”—the freedom to choose—and those who have are thwarted. Judith is forced into a convent by the men after she kills Sparky Driscoll; Grainne is defeated at the end by Patsy spying from the jakes (361) and by her son Cormac who runs off to alert Michael.

Cormac, as noted earlier, carries the name of the mythological Grainne's father, Cormac Mac Art, who, in the Ossianic Cycle, had appointed Finn chief of the Fenians (Leach 200). In accordance with the myth O'Faolain suggests a father/son role exchange in the last scene as Cormac assumes control of the family: he races to fetch his father in the Heraldry Commission; he gives Michael "a chance" (368) to dissuade Grainne, then himself makes the final plea: "You can't just leave us" (368). Michael, chewing peppermints to cover his midday drinking, is silent until Grainne has left, and, as if to underscore the shift of ages in this final scene, Cormac says his mother is "behaving as people near *his* age were expected to behave" (368). The son becomes father: paternal control is reasserted.

Girard feels it is "the simultaneous presence of external and internal mediation in the same work [that] seems to us to confirm the unity of novelistic literature" (52). Both are evident in *No Country for Young Men*, and the structure of the novel is highlighted by the overlayment of Girard's triangle. But the " 'triangular desire' motif also brings into focus the suffocating interdependence of the ineffectual Irish man and the male-dependent Irish woman. The triangular forces become a cage, entrapping and preserving the characters like Heaney's "little adulteress" in his poem "Punishment" who is uncovered in the bog and who, like Judith, is a "poor scapegoat." Judith, entombed in her bog-like memory, is suspended in a similar stasis in time. Grainne attempts to leave—she does leave Cormac and Michael in the final scene of the novel—but the ending is ambiguous. It is Judith who sees James's car slide into the water, who sees Patsy bang with a spade or an oar "the hands of the chap who is trying to clamber out" (367) as Owen Roe interrogates her about the ancient murder of Sparky Driscoll. James's murder and Sparky's murder coincide at the apex of the novel and are alone observed by Judith, and, true to O'Faolain's depiction of Judith throughout, no one believes her this time either: " 'Bonkers!' [Owen Roe] mouthed 'Harmless' " (367). She is not a "vaniteuse" confined by forces of triangular desire, but is preserved, cloistered by the men who have electroshocked her memory from her, the "young men" of the novel's title.

"Sailing to Byzantium," from which O'Faolain shapes the line for her title, depicts Yeats's image of escape from modern confusion and disorder, where "...all neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect," to a country of high artistic integrity, the sort of escape from a chaotic present that O'Faolain's characters are unable to effect. They have given up their individual wills: the men to Ireland and to drink, the women to Ireland and the men. Judith's ideal, indeed the one she murders for, is an Ireland run by young men. She tells Sparky:

"Kathleen's fellow, Owen, will be in the Dail for sure. It'll be a country run by young men."

"What about the women? They'll have a say now too, won't they?"

She shrugged. "The men in this country would never let women have a say." (213)

No Country for Young Men is a gloomy depiction of the energies at work in contemporary Ireland, and a superimposition of Girard's triangular forces on the novel only gives Ann Weekes's feminist reading increased validity. At the end

we are left with the hollow sound of Grainne's boots "clumping" (369) along the canal, like the sound of Nora's door slamming, but we wonder if Grainne will get beyond "the old place" (362), their rendezvous spot, where James lies dead and mutilated in his car.

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