

HENRY JAMES'S "THE FRIENDS OF THE FRIENDS" AND THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORK THEORY

By

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"Every one has had friends it has seemed a happy thought to bring together, and every one remembers that his happiest thoughts have not been his greatest successes...."

~ "The Friends of the Friends" (331)

In an entry of his notebook dated 21 December 1895, Henry James describes his idea for

a scrap of a tale, or a scrap of a fantasy, of 2 persons who have constantly heard of each other, constantly been near each other, constantly *missed* each other. They have never met—though repeatedly told that they ought to know each other, etc.: the sort of thing that so often happens. They must be, I suppose, a man and a woman. At last it has been arranged—they really *are* to meet: arranged by some 3^d person,

the friend of each, who takes an interest in their meeting—sympathetically—officially, blunderingly, whatever it may be: as also so often happens. (*Notebooks* 231, emphases in the original)

This “germ” would culminate in the magazine publication, in May 1896,¹ of James’s short story “The Way It Came,” which James subsequently re-titled “The Friends of the Friends” for its inclusion in the New York Edition.² Under neither designation has the narrative received much attention since its publication more than a century ago. Literary critics have generally regarded “The Friends of the Friends” as an “unimportant tale” (Putt 395), and James himself admitted, in his notebook, to thinking the tale “a

¹ “The Way it Came” originally appeared in the *Chap Book* (1 May 1896) and in *Chapman’s Magazine of Fiction* (May 1896).

² Patricia Laurence has suggested that the changed title enhances readers’ sense of what she calls “psychological vertigo” (119), since calling the story “The Friends of the Friends” leaves open the question of which characters in the story constitute the “friends” and which constitute the original friends’ friends (that is, the “friends of the friends”). While I agree with Laurence’s broader point regarding the elusiveness of this title, I would suggest that the dynamic she describes might just as easily be termed “sociological vertigo,” since James’s narrative, as this essay will show, seems at least equally concerned with the ever-evolving nature of social relations. In other words, I think it likely that James altered the title so as better to emphasize what I maintain is the narrative’s pronounced sociological orientation; more so than “The Way it Came,” “The Friends of the Friends” foregrounds the story’s exploration of networked relationship structures, the chain-like continuities connecting friend with friend—and their friends with each other.

rather thin little fantasy" (231). However, despite the fact that "The Friends of the Friends" has been relegated to the status of "minor work," reading James's tale alongside the German sociologist Georg Simmel's foundational theorizations of dyads and triads (which I will outline below) yields a much higher estimation of the story's project and its achievement.

"The Friends of the Friends" is narrated by an unnamed female character who relates the tale of her two friends: one a man, the other a woman, both also unnamed.³ By all accounts these two individuals should have met long ago, yet they continually fail to cross one another's path. Sometimes pensive, at other times patently absurd, James's tale recounts the "several years" during which the narrator's two friends attempt, unsuccessfully, to make one another's acquaintance (333). Then the twist: when the female friend dies suddenly at the end of the narrative, we learn that she and the male friend *have* met one another, albeit under decidedly bizarre, and possibly supernatural, circumstances. In describing the protracted process by which two individuals who share a mutual acquaintance

³ That each of these characters goes unnamed extends the narrative's resemblance to a kind of scientifically "objective" sociological experiment. Readers might even be put in mind of Simmel's descriptions of the hypothetical individuals "A, B, C..." I strive for clarity in the remainder of this chapter by referring to the three principal characters in James's tale as (1) "the narrator," (2) "the female friend," and (3) "the male friend" or "the fiancé" as consistently as possible.

finally come to meet, James's narrative functions something like a social-scientific case study—an examination of how, and with what consequences, strangers become "friends of friends" and "friends of friends" become friends of each other.

Particularly now, with the proliferation of social-network media and network-oriented discourses in the twenty-first century, "The Friends of the Friends" demands renewed attention. (Surely, one would be challenged to think of a title in all of American literature that sounds so much like a link on Facebook.) Published during the same period that witnessed the historical emergence of social network theory, "The Friends of the Friends" illustrates how particular network dynamics affect—here tragically—the individual person. Moreover, as will become clear in what follows, one of the narrative's most fascinating (and controversial) qualities is its sudden shift, approximately two-thirds of the way in, away from psychological realism and toward the Gothic. Here, too, reading James's narrative in conjunction with Simmel's examinations of social-network phenomena proves useful. Indeed, while network theory does not resolve the story's ambiguous ending—which provocatively raises the possibility that a supernatural haunting has occurred—it does allow us to see James's sudden swerve into the territory of the Gothic as flowing logically from his project to explore the power of particular network processes, namely triadic closure.

In the section that follows, I outline some of the foundational principles of social network theory, particularly the pioneering work of Simmel, James's

contemporary. I then turn to a close reading of "The Friends of the Friends" to explain how and to what effect James's narrative engages imaginatively with these principles—even enacting Simmel's emergent network theory on the level of narrative plot. To be sure, meetings and introductions often function as crucial plot points in James's fiction, but nowhere is this more conspicuously the case than in "The Friends of the Friends," the whole plot of which revolves around a meeting—or, rather, around the mere possibility of a meeting. The narrator's recounting of her two friends' vexed journey from non-acquaintanceship to acquaintanceship comprises the bulk of the narrative; James's story thus takes as its principal subject the same "expansion of the dyad" that Simmel was elsewhere conceptualizing under the auspices of sociological inquiry.

Georg Simmel and the Origins of Social Network Theory

Social network theory presumes that the ties or relations connecting individuals are more determinative than the individuals themselves: one's positioning within a particular social context, in other words, impresses limitations on the influence of one's "character" or individual will. While modern social network theory could reasonably be said to have multiple points of origin, contemporary network researchers most often look to the philosopher and early sociologist Georg Simmel, sometimes called the "first sociologist of modernity," as the founder of their discipline (Frisby, *Georg Simmel* 27). A prolific scholar throughout the 1890s and into the first decades of the 20th century, Simmel is perhaps best known today for his studies of urban subjectivity, a topic he takes

up, for instance, in his widely anthologized essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903).⁴ What often goes remarked in examinations of Simmel's scholarship, however, is his propensity to connect his analyses of city life with his broader interest in what he called the social

⁴ I have not found the "smoking gun" that would prove Henry James had read his contemporary Simmel's work, so I cannot go so far as to make the claim that James had Simmel specifically in mind during his writing of "The Friends of the Friends." Still, while my argument in this essay does not depend on James having read Simmel, there is plenty of circumstantial evidence to suggest that James would have been familiar with Simmel's distinct brand of sociology. According to David Frisby, Simmel's work "exceeded the availability of the work of any other European sociologist" of his period (qtd. in Spykman ix). In fact, thirteen articles authored by Simmel were published in English between the years 1893 and 1910; several of these appeared in American periodicals, including *The American Journal of Sociology* and *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. That William James's philosophical and psychological work overlaps in certain respects with Simmel's sociology further adds to the likelihood that Henry James would have had some familiarity with Simmel. In the late 1880s, George Santayana wrote to William James that he had "discovered a Privat Dozent, Dr. Simmel, whose lectures interest me very much"; he went on to tell James that Simmel was "the brightest man in Europe" (qtd. in Levine, Carter, Gorman 815n.4). In 1904, William James would himself refer to Simmel as "a humanist of the most radical sort" (863). Meanwhile, Simmel's and William James's writings were beginning to be thought about in conjunction with one another; for example, Dickinson Miller's article "Professor James on Philosophical Method," published in *The Philosophical Review* in 1899, briefly puts the two thinkers into dialogue with each other.

world's "web of group affiliations" (Allan 160). Yet Simmel, Kenneth Allan contends, was "one of the first to think in [network] terms" (160). Challenging the conventional wisdom of his era, Simmel suggested that "society" should be regarded neither as an "autonomous entity" nor as a wide-scale field of "isolated atoms" (i.e., individual persons), but rather as a matrix of reciprocal relationships evolving through perpetual interaction (Frisby, *Georg Simmel* 36). Far from a reified institution that might be studied in and of itself, "society" signified for Simmel "only the name of the sum of [social] interactions," or the cumulative dealings of a whole "constellation of individuals" (qtd. in Frisby, *Simmel and Since* 8).

To elucidate this idea, Simmel turned to the metaphor—one familiar to those who study literary "texts"—of weaving, or the thread. Stressing that the monadic subject should be viewed as "but the crossing-point of social threads" (qtd. in Frisby, *Simmel and Since* 40), Simmel argued that then-contemporary sociology must take greater "consideration of the delicate, invisible threads that are woven between one person and another" (qtd. in Frisby, *Simmel and Since* 10). He subsequently used this conceit to illustrate that society constitutes less a static formation than a dynamic process:

On every day, at every hour, such threads are spun, are allowed to fall, are taken up again, replaced by others, intertwined with others. Here lie the interactions... between the atoms of society which bear the whole tenacity and elasticity, the whole colorfulness and unity of this so evident and so

puzzling life of society.

(qtd. in Frisby, *Simmel and Since* 10-11)

For Simmel, then, society is fundamentally protean: a web of relations that evolves through the perpetual tying or cutting of interpersonal "threads." Hence Simmel functioned as a pivotal figure in the emergence of social network theory largely because his turn-of-the-century scholarship laid the groundwork for further research not just on the structure but also the *dynamics* of social networks.

At the heart of Simmel's nascent theory of network dynamics is his juxtaposition of dyadic (two-person) with triadic (three-person) relations. More than merely contrasting these two structures, Simmel aims to illuminate the process by which dyads *become* triads. This innovative point of focus—on the creation of the triad—further explains why contemporary network researchers situate Simmel as an intellectual founder of their discipline. As Charles Kadushin writes in *Understanding Social Networks* (2012), "network analysis really begins with triads" (22); in fact, the triad can be considered "the most elementary network" (23). Emphasizing that triads (unlike the dyads from which they've evolved) are characterized by a constant threat of instability, Simmel claims that "no matter how close a triad may be, there is always the occasion on which two of the three members regard the third as an intruder" (*Sociology* 135). He explains his reasoning:

For among three elements, each one operates as an intermediary between the other two, exhibiting the twofold function of such an organ, which is to unite

and to separate. Where three elements, A, B, C, constitute a group, there is, in addition to the direct relationship between A and B, for instance, their indirect one, which is derived from their common relation to C. (*Sociology* 135)

To paraphrase Simmel, the indirect or mediated relations afforded by triadic structures inevitably affect the direct relations also located therein. In other words, Person A's relationship with Person B cannot but be altered by their mutual acquaintanceship with Person C.

This line of thinking is central to modern social network theory, which assumes that the local ties between persons are deeply influenced by their relative position within a wider network of relations. However, as Simmel himself observes, the nature of this influence varies widely: while a triad's indirect relation "may strengthen the direct one," it "may also disturb it" (*Sociology* 135). Sometimes the addition of Person C to the dyad A-B reinforces the strength of that dyadic bond, but there are other instances when three really does become, as the cliché suggests, "a crowd." In either case, whether the addition of a third party proves positively or negatively determinative, Simmel refers to this development as "the expansion of the dyad," and in his view this metamorphosis constitutes the most significant process in the formation of society *qua* society. Indeed, for Simmel and his intellectual descendants—and also, as I will demonstrate, for Henry James—this phenomenon of the "expansion of the dyad" has far-reaching implications for social networks and the

individual persons within them.⁵

Although Simmel does not explicitly coin the term, his notion that society develops through the perpetual completion of triads anticipates what contemporary social network theorists now refer to as the "principle of triadic closure." This principle holds that "two strangers who possess a mutual friend will tend to become acquainted in time" (Watts 58). Alternately, the principle of triadic closure can be stated as the following formula: "If A knows B and B knows C, then C is much more likely to know A than just anyone picked at random" (Watts 60). By increasing the odds that two persons acquainted with a common third party will themselves become acquainted,

⁵ By claiming that a three-person acquaintanceship structure is inherently different than a two-person structure, Simmel radically suggests that *numbers* largely determine the *nature* of relations, or that, in the social world, form largely determines content. It comes as no surprise, then, that mine is not the first study to find parallels between Simmel's work and that of Henry James. Generally considered the "founder of 'Formal Sociology,'" Simmel has been read as offering a sociological equivalent to James's engagement with literary formalism (Allan 165). Ross Posnock, for example, has argued that both Simmel and James believed in "the primacy of form and representation as constraints that give meaning to human conduct" (97). In contrast to such studies, however, my own argument in this essay is less concerned with elucidating the correlation between Simmel's sociology and James's aesthetics than with making the claim that James's work was itself profoundly sociological. In my view, scholars have not yet turned enough attention to the way in which James uses narrative fiction to explore some of the very issues that Simmel was likewise exploring via nascent sociological methods.

the principle of triadic closure reinforces the important fact that changes in social networks do not happen completely, or even mostly, at random. Rather, new relationships tend to develop from the pre-existing structure, according to the dictates of a rule-bound system: individual C meets individual A not by chance, but instead because individual B, who already knows both, functions as an intermediary. As the network theorist Duncan Watts puts it, "Not all potential relationships are equally likely. Who I know tomorrow depends at least to some extent on who I know today" (72).

For its own part, the principle of triadic closure complements social network theory's more general concept of "clustering," or the idea that an individual's acquaintances have a propensity also to be acquaintances of each other (Watts 40). The network theorist Mark Newman, striking a rather Jamesian note, has defined clustering as the notion that "the friend of your friend is also likely to be your friend" ("Structure" 183). As a particular form of clustering, then, triadic closure helps to explain how and why social networks evolve over a given period of time: that unclosed triads tend toward closure precipitates increased connectivity within the whole of a networked system.

But *why*, one might ask, do triads tend toward closure? Why does social clustering occur in the first place? While Simmel approaches this question only indirectly, social scientists building on his work have more recently suggested that the answer has to do with relational "balance," which "functions as a deep-seated goal of

human interaction" (Kilduff and Corley 214). Turning to principles associated with Gestalt psychology, these scholars suggest that unbalanced social structures tend to produce anxiety, conflict, and interpersonal dissonance. The quintessential example of an unbalanced social structure is the "unclosed" triad: the asymmetrical configuration wherein "individual A has strong links to B and C but the latter two share none" (Degenne and Forsé 198). (Here the visually inclined might picture a triangle with one missing edge.) The social scientist Mark Granovetter has gone so far as to refer to the unclosed triad as "the forbidden triad." (Despite the appeal of sounding like the title of a wildly improbable *Indiana Jones* tale, this term has not yet entered the popular lexicon.) Such triads are "forbidden," Granovetter clarifies, only in the sense that they are "unnatural and improbable." They are improbable because, according to the principle of triadic closure, "a triad with two strong links is very conducive to developing a third strong link" (qtd. in Degenne and Forsé 198-9).

Forbidden triads, then, are triads that resist, at least temporarily, the principle of triadic closure. Predictably, such interpersonal triangles become increasingly unstable as tie strength increases between the two members who do share a direct connection. To conceptualize this latter point, consider the example of a marriage in which Spouse A and Spouse B could be said to share a strong tie. The principle of triadic closure suggests that the stronger Spouse B's link to a third party—say, Person C—the more social pressure exerted on Spouse A and Person C also to form a link of comparatively strong proportion. If Spouse

B maintains a close friendship with Person C yet Spouse A has never even *met* Person C, this configuration would constitute an example of the “forbidden triad”—and, indeed, it’s not difficult to imagine the various forms of social (not to mention narrative) tension potentially resulting from this kind of arrangement.

My reading of Henry James’s “The Friends of the Friends,” to which I turn in the next section, contends that James’s odd tale stages formally some of the very network dynamics with which Simmel was engaged theoretically during the same period. In performing a narrative enactment of the process that Simmel called the “expansion of the dyad,” James’s story explores the phenomenon of triadic closure in relation to issues that recur in his work—issues including sexuality, psychology, and individual autonomy. Underscoring the power of triadic closure, and of emergent social-network principles more generally, James’s story presents readers with a character-narrator who actively attempts to *preserve* a forbidden triad—that is, to prevent triadic closure from occurring—and fails spectacularly.

Narrating the forbidden triad.

Converging with Simmel’s foundational theories about networked relations, and, moreover, anticipating advances in network research that would build on Simmel’s scholarship, the plot of “The Friends of the Friends” reveals points of overlap between James’s fiction and then-contemporary social-scientific discourses. From the beginning of the tale, the narrator’s emphasis—hence

James's, too—falls upon (1) the process by which the narrator's two friends come to know one another; (2) the agent or mode of agency responsible for setting this process in motion; and (3) the social and psychological consequences of their meeting, especially on the person of the narrator. In other words, "The Friends of the Friends" takes up the interconnected questions of how, why, and with what consequences the two friends finally make contact. The narrator opens her story as follows:

I know perfectly of course that I brought it on myself; but that doesn't make it any better. I was the first to speak of her to him—he had never even heard her mentioned. Even if I had happened not to speak some one else would have made up for it: I tried afterwards to find comfort in that reflexion.

(325)

As she reflects on the dramatic events that have instigated her narration, the narrator initially holds herself accountable for all that has transpired, since she had been the first to mention her two friends to one another. Yet while the narrator castigates herself for drawing her two friends into one another's orbit, she also "trie[s]... to find comfort" in the likelihood that her two friends would eventually have met anyway, even without her personal involvement (325). The very first lines of the narrative, then, dramatize the narrator's mental "going-over" of sociological processes: that her two friends would eventually make one another's acquaintance, the narrator assures herself in retrospect, was inevitable in any case.

The reasons for the suggested inevitability of the two

friends' meeting constitute points of great interest in "The Friends of the Friends," underscoring James's engagement with issues germane to the social sciences in general and social-network dynamics in particular. Initially, the narrator suggests that her two friends are bound to meet because they are, in her words, "birds of a feather." In fact, each attests, however improbably, to having encountered one of their parents in ghostly form (325). (The female friend claims to have seen her father's apparition; the male friend claims to have seen his mother's.) It is this strange similitude of experience that moves the narrator to mention her two friends to each other in the first place, reasoning that "certainly they ought to meet... certainly they would have something in common" (328). Because her friends' experiences overlap in this remarkable way, the narrator believes they are sure to form a strong connection of their own. Thus, after mentioning each friend to the other, the narrator takes advantage of her intermediary position by agreeing to broker an introduction.

Yet while their parallel experiences suggest to the narrator that a meeting between her two friends is the natural and appropriate course of action, "The Friends of the Friends" also invokes the sociological concept of clustering (more specifically, the principle of triadic closure) in explaining why such an acquaintanceship is bound to happen. When the narrator tells her female friend that it is simply "too preposterous one shouldn't somehow succeed in introducing one's dearest friend to one's second self," her words speak to the strong force exerted by—and social utility of—triadic closure: it is simply untenable for

one's fiancé not to meet one's dearest friend (337). (Midway through the story the narrator accepts her male friend's marriage proposal; I return to this development below.)

In this sense, social clustering—a concept developed from Simmel's pioneering work on triads—significantly informs the trajectory of the plot in "The Friends of the Friends." Although the narrator plays the critical role in bringing her two friends together (she was, after all, "the first to speak of her to him—he had never even heard her mentioned"), it is not *only* the narrator who has mentioned each to each. The two persons, it so happens, have a multitude of mutual acquaintances, and, as we've already seen, the narrator retroactively "find[s] comfort" in the likelihood that her two friends, being disconnected points in other social triads, would have met in due course even without her involvement. The narrator says of her female friend:

She made, charming as she was, more and more friends, and... it regularly befell that these friends were sufficiently also friends of his to bring him up in conversation. It was odd that without belonging, as it were, to the same world or, according to the horrid term, the same set, my baffled pair should have happened in so many cases to fall in with the same people and make them join in the droll chorus. She had friends who didn't know each other but

who inevitably and punctually recommended him.⁶
(330-331)

At such moments James seems to anticipate what social network theorists, building on Simmel's study of the expansion of the dyad, have since demonstrated: that networks are diachronic and evolving structures; that social acquaintanceship is self-perpetuating; that more friends beget more friends, exponentially. If the tendency of the social world is to become ever more clustered, as dyads become triads, then it follows that although the narrator's two friends don't know each other at the beginning of the tale, they are very likely to meet *in due time* because they share so many mutual acquaintances, any one of whom might act as intermediary.

Yet for much of the story it seems that James invokes these sociological principles only to undermine them. Early on, the narrator signals in advance that "no meeting [between the two friends] would occur—as meetings are commonly understood" (328). As her admission suggests, the first twist in James's narrative is that, despite the *hypothetical* inevitability of the two friends' meeting, for a long period of time—in fact, "several years"—it remains impossible to make this meeting actually happen. The

⁶ This passage might be usefully compared to a similar sentiment in James's "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903), when John Marcher becomes reacquainted with May Bartram after a period of many years: "They were reduced for a few minutes more to wondering a little helplessly why—since they seemed to know a certain number of the same people—their reunion had been so long averted" (66-7).

story's suspense emerges almost entirely from the question of whether or not Simmel's "expansion of the dyad" will finally occur. Indeed, as if lampooning the significance of scenes of meeting in narrative fiction, James ratchets up the anticipation of a meeting between the narrator's two friends even as he perpetually defers it.

At first, the circumstances conspiring against the two friends appear to be largely accidental, the work of pure "Chance." As the narrator remarks, "the very elements" seemed intent on her friends not becoming acquainted: "A cold, a headache, a bereavement, a storm, a fog, an earthquake, a cataclysm, infallibly intervened" (333). The narrator bemoans how "all the lively reasons" why her two friends should and must meet were somehow

reduced to naught by the strange law that made them bang so many doors in each other's face, made them the buckets in the well, the two ends of the see-saw, the two parties in the State, so that when one was up the other was down, when one was out the other was in; neither by any possibility entering a house till the other had left it or leaving it all unawares till the other was at hand. They only arrived when they had been given up, which was also precisely when they departed. They were in a word alternate and incompatible.... (332-333)

The narrator's metaphors reflect her sense that her two friends, though they have not yet made face-to-face contact, are still somehow connected, albeit in a way that causes them always to be inversely positioned in regards to one another. (The "buckets in the well" are of course linked by

a single rope, the "two ends of the see-saw" by a single board.) Thus, as represented by the narrator at this point in the story, the interpersonal situation is a paradoxical one: the two friends are vaguely connected to one another, yet the narration also implies that it is precisely the nature of this connection (the rope, the board) that prevents them from making direct contact with one another. No wonder that this "strange law" (332), as the narrator calls it, rings of the absurd: "the whole business," she observes, "was beyond a joke" (333).

The tension between "Chance," on the one hand, and some "strange law," on the other—these being the narrator's two distinct explanations for why her two friends can't seem to meet—becomes a significant thematic issue over the course of James's narrative, and attending to Simmel's network theory allows us to observe why. James goes out of his way to show that all three members of the story's triad, but especially the narrator's female friend, are prone to a kind of philosophic fatalism when it comes to the processes of social acquaintanceship. Upon initially telling her female friend about her male friend, for instance, the narrator is surprised that the female friend does not say "Oh bring him to see me!" but rather "I must meet him certainly: yes, I shall look out for him!" (330). James portrays the female friend as determined to leave the meeting up to Chance, preferring to "look out" for the male friend rather than actively seek him out, or even allow herself to be introduced to him. As near-miss follows upon near-miss, the narrator begins to sense that her two friends might actually be starting to dread "the last accident of

all... the accident that would bring them together." After all, the narrator realizes, so much anticipation can only breed anti-climax: by this point, "a mere meeting would be mere flatness" (333).

While the deferral of meeting perturbs the two friends, James illustrates that the anticipation of triadic closure weighs most heavily on the mind of the character-narrator herself. Indeed, the narrator's desires, and therefore arguably the plot in its entirety, are largely determined by her evolving perspective on the intermediary position she holds in relation to her two friends. When the narrator accepts her male friend's marriage proposal approximately halfway through the narrative, James's tale takes yet another sudden turn. Acting from what she refers to as her own "dread of jealousy," the narrator, who had until this point been trying to bring her two friends together, now determines to take an active role in keeping them apart (337). Retroactively interpreting her two friends' series of accidental misses as a providential sign meant for her, and fearing that the closing of their triad will negatively affect the stronger tie she now shares with her fiancé, the narrator decides to take matters into her own hands. She describes her changed outlook in a remarkable passage:

What had the interference been but the finger of Providence pointing out a danger? The danger was of course for poor me. [The friends' meeting] had been kept at bay by a series of accidents unexampled in their frequency; but the reign of accidents was now visibly at an end. I had an intimate conviction that both parties would keep the

tryst. It was more and more impressed on me that they were approaching, converging.... If the reign of accident was over I must take up the succession. (338)

And "take up the succession" she does. When it appears that the two friends are finally about to meet at the narrator's residence, the narrator deceives her fiancé by writing him a false note that beckons him away, thus preventing him from keeping the engagement.

By constructing "The Friends of the Friends" in this manner, James displays an uncanny grasp of how interpersonal relationships are shaped by the rule-bound dynamics of social networks. The narrative's progression not only dramatizes an "expansion of the dyad," but, even more, allows James to explore how the principle of triadic closure affects the social and psychological destinies of individual persons. Perhaps counter-intuitively, it is precisely the increasing strength of the tie connecting the narrator and her male friend that provokes the narrator to prevent her two friends from meeting one another. This point of tension in the story presumes a particular set of network dynamics: when the narrator and her male friend become engaged, the pressure for the narrator's two friends to make one another's acquaintance is ratcheted up even further (in accordance with the principle of triadic closure), yet the narrator suddenly has a personal incentive to prevent this meeting from occurring (since she fears that the closing of the triad will impair her newly strengthened dyadic relationship with her fiancé). That is, while in one sense the engagement draws the narrator's two friends

closer together, increasing the likelihood that they will (and should) meet, it simultaneously provides the narrator with a strong impulse to keep them apart. As a plot point, then, the engagement functions dramatically to pit the principle of triadic closure against the narrator's self-protecting desire to thwart her friends' meeting. In this sense, "The Friends of the Friends" capitalizes on the dramatic potential of Simmel's theory about the "expansion of the dyad." By rendering the narrator's attempts to keep her friends apart, James interrogates the extent to which individuals can resist sociological principles, or, put differently, the degree to which network dynamics effectively determine individuals.

Hence "The Friends of the Friends" offers a provocative meditation on the risks and rewards of being the intermediary person (or "hub") in a forbidden triad. James was fully aware of this tension at work in the narrative—between the logic of network constraints, on the one hand, and individual agency, on the other. In his notebook he asserts that the narrator's two friends finally must meet "because of [the engagement]," yet he also acknowledges that the engagement has changed the narrator's perspective on her friends' meeting. He assumes her voice on the page of the notebook, writing: "I'm engaged—if now at the last *moment* something should intervene!" (*Notebooks* 244, emphasis in the original). In accordance with Simmel, James thus demonstrates that the intermediary individual's situation is a paradoxical, possibly even self-negating one, since by introducing two of her acquaintances the intermediary simultaneously embraces the full power of her position and risks limiting her own structural necessity, her

own centrality and social capital.⁷ Once an introduction is brokered and a direct tie established between the two friends, the narrator's intermediation will no longer exist. That she deceives her fiancé to prevent the friends' meeting from occurring reinforces James's representation of the narrator as maintaining an unhealthy attachment to the capital afforded by her central position in this triad.

"The Friends of the Friends" in fact manages to suggest that, apart from any relationship with a specific person, the narrator's position in the network itself elicits gratification—even a kind of erotic pleasure. For instance, one particularly powerful dramatization of the psychological consequences attendant on the hub position occurs after the narrator has deceived her fiancé, thus preventing her two friends from meeting. The scene concludes when the fiancé, having arrived after the female

⁷The narrator's intermediary position here speaks to what contemporary network theorists refer to as "betweenness centrality," or the degree to which an individual node, because of its role as a hub, becomes "indispensable to certain transactions" in the network (Degenne and Forsé 136). In "The Friends of the Friends," James seems less concerned with the sheer *number* of links these characters maintain with their social counterparts (what network researchers call "degree centrality") than with the *intermediary value* attributed to particular positions within a linked acquaintanceship structure ("betweenness centrality"). Social scientists, observing that "social capital is inversely proportional to the redundancy in [one's] network," have argued that such capital has more to do with positionality—does the individual fill a structural hole that no one else does?—than it does pure volume (Degenne and Forsé 118).

friend's departure (foiled yet again!), bestows a kiss upon the narrator. The narrator's striking reaction to this kiss is to recall that her female friend had also kissed her just "an hour or two before," and to feel "for an instant as if he were taking from my lips the very pressure of hers" (343). This moment is all the more remarkable for the fact that the narrator describes her feelings—in particular, her recognition that she operates here as a kind of erotic intermediary—in a conspicuously neutral register. Perhaps the most intuitive way to read this scene is to interpret the narrator as saddened or frustrated by the fact that her fiancé is taking from her own lips the impression of another's. Significantly, however, neither James nor the narrator provides enough evidence for us to conclude this with any certainty. The narrator's noticeable lack of comment on the emotional effect of these two kisses opens up the possibility that her feelings concerning her place in this triad are more various and complicated than "mere" jealousy. Instead, James writes the scenes as if deliberately to leave room for a reading in which the narrator gains pleasure from her service as an erotic go-between, fetishizing her role as social intermediary for its own sake. Until the two friends manage to establish direct contact between themselves, anything transferred between them (even kisses) must pass through the narrator.⁸

⁸ Attending to the convergence between James and Simmel thus also helps to clarify what is distinct about the narrative's representation of sexuality in the context of triadic relations. Such instances of erotic intermediation, especially those figured in the form of a social triangle, recall Eve Sedgwick's groundbreaking work in *Between Men: English*

Another of the narrative's most fascinating and controversial qualities is its sudden shift, approximately two-thirds of the way into the tale, away from the genre of psychological realism and toward the Gothic. Indeed, it is at this point in "The Friends of the Friends," after the narrator has successfully prevented the friends' impending

Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (1992). Aiming to elucidate the prototypical "love triangle" narrative, Sedgwick demonstrates how male characters' homosocial desires tend to get routed through their shared connection with a female beloved; the female character, in this sense, functions as an intermediary through which male homosocial bonds can be formed in an indirect, hence less exposed or "threatening," way. Sedgwick frames her argument as a re-contextualization of the philosopher René Girard's "insistence that, in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved" (Sedgwick 21). For its part, Girard's idea of "mimetic" desire, outlined in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961), posits that all desire is mediated by or "borrowed" from other desiring subjects—i.e., one desires a given object because that object is already desired by another (the rival). While James evidently shares their interest in the functionality of social triads, "The Friends of the Friends" complicates Sedgwick's (and Girard's) framework by inverting the gender dynamics involved. Indeed, James's narrative eschews male homosociality in favor of focusing on how the female narrator's desire for her female friend gets re-routed through the figure of the male friend. (This is to say nothing of the female friend's potential desire for the narrator—a desire that remains even less explicit than the narrator's own.) For all of the narrator's seeming jealousy that incites her to keep her relationship with her fiancé closely guarded, the narrator is equally as careful to guard her "particularly precious" acquaintanceship with the female friend (331).

meeting from occurring at her home, that things begin to get screwy—by which I mean the narrative begins to resemble *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Like the latter novella, "The Friends of the Friends" evokes Tzvetan Todorov's notion of "the Fantastic" by wavering continually between two possible readings, one grounded in a natural and the other in a supernatural interpretation of the story's concluding events, which I'll now briefly describe.⁹ After the male friend fails to appear, the female friend leaves the narrator's residence once again disappointed that no meeting has occurred. Later that very evening she suddenly dies from what the narrator calls a "weakness of the heart" (345). The next day the narrator's fiancé (the male friend) shares with the narrator some surprising news: he has finally met her female friend; she had come to his residence the previous evening; he has, he claims, seen in her in the flesh. This revelation shocks the narrator. She denies that her fiancé's story could be true, adamant that her female friend had already died by the time

⁹ "The Friends of the Friends" further resembles *The Turn of the Screw* in that both are constructed as "one-sided" frame tales. "The Friends of the Friends" opens with an unnamed but presumably male narrator who relates (to a similarly mysterious narratee) how he has been reading the female narrator's diaries with an eye toward "the possibility of publication" (323). The story that follows, he explains, is one "fragment" of the material he has at his disposal. In his assessment, this particular narrative is "nearly enough a rounded thing, an intelligible whole," albeit a story recorded "evidently... years ago" (323). After this brief and elusive preface, the frame narrator's voice does not return to "The Friends of the Friends."

the fiancé claims to have met her. The fiancé insists that the female friend was alive when she visited him, ensuring the narrator: "I saw her living.... I saw her as I see you now" (347).

Anticipating James's characterization of *The Turn of the Screw*'s governess, the narrator of "The Friends of the Friends" now begins to offer especially dubious interpretations of the story with which she has become involved. She rejects her fiancé's account of the meeting, instead substituting her own bizarre explanation: "She had been to him—yes, and by an impulse as charming as he liked; but oh she hadn't been in the body!" (351). Clinging to the belief that her female friend was already dead at the time of the presumed meeting, the narrator insists that what her fiancé witnessed was either the product of a dream or a supernatural apparition. This explanation, she argues not very persuasively, hinges on the "simple question of evidence" (351).

James's rendering of the narrator's perspective as she grapples with her fiancé's story is characteristically nuanced in its depiction of psychological angst and self-deception. In fact, James further reinforces our suspicion of the narrator's interpretation by implying that the narrator doesn't quite trust it herself. For while maintaining her "theory" and "conviction" that her two friends have "still never 'met'," in telling the narrative that is "The Friends of the Friends" the narrator offers some surprisingly self-aware observations (357). She acknowledges, for instance, that her supernaturally-oriented interpretation is perhaps the version of the story that her own "reviving jealousy found

easiest to accept" (351). Moreover, the narrator confesses that she sometimes cannot help feeling a "vivid sense that... there was indeed a relation between [her two friends] and that he had actually been face to face with her" (347). When at the end of "The Friends of the Friends" the narrator refers to her two friends' relationship as an "inconceivable communion" (364), what these words imply is the likelihood that the narrator would rather conceive the inconceivable—that is, a ghostly visitation—than allow herself to conceive what's *all too* conceivable: that her friends might actually have made direct contact "in the flesh."

Conclusion.

On the few occasions when "The Friends of the Friends" has been investigated in any sustained way, scholars have tended to focus on these final enigmatic scenes, situating the story in the context of James's appropriation of traditionally Gothic motifs. Some critics suggest that "The Friends of the Friends" should be considered one of James's ghostly tales, a generic sibling to "Sir Edmund Orme" (1891) or "The Jolly Corner" (1908). Millicent Bell, for example, unequivocally describes "The Friends of the Friends" as a ghost story, one that, in her view, sees James using phantasmal encounters to meditate on the "persistence of the might-have-been" (27). Other critics, however, are understandably less certain about the narrative's status as a ghost story. This uncertainty is on display in a reading offered by John Pearson, who asserts that "The Friends of the Friends" is a story in which "the

real and the unreal connect (perhaps even copulate)"—but then immediately backs off the full implications of this argument by adding the rather significant qualifier that "practically speaking, the union occurs only in the narrator's imagination" (128). For still others, "The Friends of the Friends" remains staunchly ambiguous, offering "two alternative possibilities," one natural and the other supernatural: "either the woman was alive when she came to visit the man or it was her spirit" (Tintner 358-359).

My own reading of "The Friends of the Friends" does not intend to resolve the story's ambiguous ending, which provocatively raises the possibility that a supernatural haunting has occurred. Rather, I mean to suggest that James's prevailing interest lies more in tracing the social and psychological effects of the two friends' meeting than in clarifying the ontological nature of that event. Locating James's fiction at the origins of social network theory allows us to see his narrative's abrupt swerve into the territory of the Gothic as flowing logically from his project to explore the power of particular network processes. Indeed, despite the narrator's self-protecting insistence that her two friends "had still never met," the force of James's story is to suggest that the two friends have made contact, even if the question of whether the female friend was alive or deceased at the time of that meeting remains an open one. Whichever the case, the narrator's relationship with her betrothed has been utterly transformed by the closing of this triad—or so the narrator argues, remarking to her fiancé that "we must reconsider our situation and recognize

that it had completely altered.” More specifically, the narrator laments that her structural position as “hub” has been replaced, telling the fiancé: “Another person has come between us” (360). “The Friends of the Friends” thus concludes on a melancholic note, indicating that the two friends’ meeting has had severe consequences: the narrator’s engagement with the male friend ruptures, the lovers split, and six years later the (now former) fiancé himself dies from mysterious causes.

In the end, James constructs “The Friends of the Friends” in such a way so as to make it difficult, if not impossible, to sort out whether the narrator’s engagement has been doomed by sociological or by psychological causes. Were the narrator’s fears legitimate ones? Would the meeting of her two friends have fundamentally changed the triad and undermined her relationship with her fiancé in any case? If “yes,” the reasons for the engagement’s dissolution are more decidedly sociological: the “expansion of the dyad” represented in the narrative necessarily reorients and destabilizes the interpersonal ties involved. In this reading, network dynamics such as those theorized by Simmel are absolutely determinative: the friends’ meeting changes everything. Or, instead, was the narrator’s conclusion that the engagement would falter if the two friends were to meet simply an instance of self-fulfilling prophecy? Might not the critical obstacle to the narrator’s union with her fiancé actually be the narrator’s own psychological instability, her obsession with what she perceives as the looming threat of triadic closure? In contrast to the former explanation, this reading locates the

source of the engagement's dissolution more in personal, psychological circumstances than in social, structural ones.

Undoubtedly, "The Friends of the Friends" cues readers to call into question the reliability of the narrator's interpretations. Yet the narrative's conflation of sociological and psychological issues—its blurring of the line between these two areas of concern—is, I want to suggest, precisely the point. "The Friends of the Friends" explores how one's structural position in a given network, in tandem with one's perception of that position, affects the individual psyche, and thus plays a significant role in shaping reality. In this way, too, Simmel's sociology illuminates James's aesthetic. Despite sometimes attempting to distinguish the social from the psychological in his own work, Simmel concedes that "all societal processes and instincts have their seat in minds," and that "sociation is, as a consequence, a psychical phenomenon" (qtd. in Frisby, "Foundation" 337). David Frisby explicates Simmel's dilemma thus: "Insofar as Simmel... maintains that explanation of the smallest interactions is necessary in order to explain the major constellations of society, he thereby traces his sociological thematic back to psychological variables" ("Foundation" 337). For James, in similar fashion, sociology would seem to be always already psychological. That is, the two are inextricable: as the narrator of "The Friends of the Friends" tragically discovers, sociological theories carry personal implications, just as individual persons cannot be completely understood apart from the social networks encompassing them.

My reading of "The Friends of the Friends" suggests

that literary critics have not yet acknowledged the full extent to which pioneering work from the social sciences, especially the nascent field of social network theory, contributed to the formation of James's vaunted psychological realism, and vice versa. Yet network dynamics of the kind studied by Simmel—and explored by James, using the resources of fictional narrative—assumes that one's place in a networked social structure is inextricably connected to one's psychological profile and one's "character," even one's fate. As evinced by the narrator's increasingly unstable conjectures, to believe that one can prevent triadic closure is for James akin to madness: new acquaintanceships are nothing if not inevitable, and in resisting this principle one may as well be attempting to resist the pull of gravity. The principle even trumps fate: describing in his notebook how he would conclude the tale, James affirms that the narrator's two friends will "meet, in spite of fate" (231, emphasis in the original).

In fact, triadic closure is shown to be so firm a principle in the world of James's story that, depending on how one interprets the elusive ending, James might even allow for the possibility that the "strange law[s]" governing social acquaintanceship constitute a kind of supernatural force in their own right. In this reading, although the narrator's two friends never meet in life, they are still destined to meet in due course, even if this means becoming acquainted after death. Ultimately James's narrative cannot, in my view, be categorized as a clear-cut ghost story. Yet by invoking the prototypically Gothic trope of phantasmal visitation to

figure emergent sociological theories, "The Friends of the Friends" maintains that social networks evolve according to identifiable—and, in this tale, spectacularly binding—principles.

Reading James's fiction in the context of the historical emergence of social network studies is a fruitful endeavor precisely because his foregrounding of sociological law or principle stands in direct contrast to literary scholars' typical characterization of network-oriented narratives. It is something of a commonplace in literary studies to demonstrate how fictional narratives so often rely on "chance meetings" to drive their plots: critics regularly point to the function of coincidence in bringing together characters who would seem on the surface to be unlikely associates (for instance, due to differences of class, ethnicity, geography, and the like).¹⁰ In "Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance," David Bordwell articulates the dominant view that in "network narratives" the "action is usually triggered by coincidence" (204):

If [characters] A and B have met, and B and C have met, the logic of the network tale suggests the need for a scene in which A encounters C—whatever the

¹⁰ For a representative study of coincidental relations in Dickens, see Neil Forsyth's "Wonderful Chains: Dickens and Coincidence" (1985). For a good introduction to the coincidence plot in narrative fiction more generally, see Hilary P. Dannenberg's "A Poetics of Coincidence in Narrative Fiction" (2004), as well as her more elaborated account in *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (2008).

causal pretext that might bind them.... The plot structure [of what can be described as social-network narratives] therefore must find ways to isolate or combine characters in compelling patterns that will replace the usual arc of goal-directed activity. The principal source of these patterns... is chance. (199)

However, in "The Friends of the Friends"—a narrative that can be said to foreground "chance *non-meetings*"—James dramatizes the determinative influence of network dynamics via a tale that frames the principle of triadic closure as *fait accompli*.¹¹ Indeed, "The Friends of the

¹¹ In *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age* (2004), the network theorist Duncan Watts states that one of social network theory's most pressing concerns lies in determining the degree to which social networks strike a balance between "randomness and order" (73). To illustrate his point, Watts asks his readers to imagine a variety of possible worlds existing at different places on this continuum. "At one end of the spectrum," he writes, "individuals *always* make new friends through their current friends, and at the other end, they *never* do" (73, emphasis in the original). In the former kind of world, the network is characterized by "order" and emerges via a rule-driven system: new friendships develop via existing friendships, through the continual completion of triads. In the latter world, however, absolute "randomness" reigns: here new friendships are forged only by chance, through an unpredictable process not beholden to the existing acquaintanceship structure. Watts makes clear that imagining worlds marked by such extremes is simply a thought-experiment meant to demonstrate the stakes of considering social networks from this angle. In our actual world, of course, the answer lies somewhere in the middle: while it is generally true that persons more often make new acquaintances through existing intermediaries, purely chance meetings

Friends" illustrates that it is precisely the *failure* to meet that is arbitrary, the work of Chance, "beyond a joke." In James's fiction, that is, meetings tend not to be coincidental so much as inevitable: the expected outcome of systematic network dynamics of the kind being studied by Simmel.¹² By attending to the convergent concerns linking "The Friends of the Friends" and Simmel's sociology, we can see how James leans on triadic closure as a basic principle driving narrative progression. Moreover, by highlighting the regular, rule-bound nature of network processes, James's fiction envisions social acquaintanceship less as the product of modern life's randomness than as a testament to the power of general principles of social organization. In this sense, James's fiction not only represents social networks, but, even more, leans on the

also do happen. That Henry James's fictional worlds so often approach the first extreme—eschewing chance meetings for the predictability provided by triadic closure—is a striking feature of his work, made all the more unique for the fact that coincidence figures prominently in so many other nineteenth-century narratives.

¹² One of the most notable exceptions occurs in James's *The Ambassadors* (1903), which opens with a random encounter: Lambert Strether and Maria Gostrey, strangers, make one another's acquaintance in the lobby of an English hotel. Interestingly, though, this exception perhaps supports my argument: in his Preface to the novel, James famously condemns Maria Gostrey's "false connexion" to Strether's narrative. Would James's retrospective opinion of this "connexion" have been different had Strether and Maria met via an introduction brokered by a mutual acquaintance? Is it possible that James conceptualized the chance meeting—even in his own fiction—as a form of narrative cheating?

affordances of narrative to approach something like an actual network theory.

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